A NOVEL BY DOUGLAS FAIRBAIRN

SHOOT

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Douglas Fairbairn graduated from Harvard and then went to sea as a deckhand on a private yacht. In 1953 he began his writing career in France. His first novel, *A Man's World*, was adapted for production on television's Studio One, and his novella *The Voice of Charlie Pont* was turned into a widely acclaimed filmscript. Mr. Fairbairn is also the author of *The Gazelle* on the Lawn, another work of fiction, and *A Squirrel of One's Own*, which is to be turned into a television documentary.

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BOOKS BY DOUGLAS FAIRBAIRN

Fiction

A MAN'S WORLD (1956)
THE VOICE OF CHARLIE PONT (1961)
A GAZELLE ON THE LAWN (1964)
SHOOT (1973)

Nonfiction

A SQUIRREL OF ONE'S OWN (1971)

SHOOT

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All of the characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

SHOOT

ONE

This is what happened. Myself and four friends were hunting along the Sturrup River one weekend in the deer season. Around six o'clock on Sunday afternoon, just as we were starting to think about going back up to our lodge on Glass Hill and packing up and heading on home, we came down to the riverbank at a point where the river is about fifty yards wide. When we got there we noticed that there was another party of hunters standing over on the opposite bank. There were either six or seven of them. They looked more or less the same as us—were dressed in camouflage the same as us and seemed to be about the same age as us. They didn't wave or anything when they saw us, so we didn't either. They just stood there looking across the river at us, and for a couple of minutes we just stood there looking back at them. Then, all of a sudden, without any warning, and I swear to God without the slightest provocation from us, one of them raised his rifle and fired at us, hitting Pete Rinaldi in the head. Pete fell down, clutching at his head, and at that point Zeke Springer, who was a superb marksman, raised his rifle and fired back once at them, hitting one of them in the face. We could see him throw his hands up to his face and spin around and fall down.

For a minute everybody froze, and then there was a lot of shouting and milling around on both sides of the river. I dragged Pete with me behind a boulder and told the other guys to spread out and take cover, and it was lucky I did because just then those guys over there all started shooting at once and the bullets hit the trees and the rocks and the dirt all around us. Of course we started shooting back, and for a while, roughly about five minutes, there was a fairly heavy exchange of fire back and forth across the river.

Then we all seemed to stop shooting at once, and it was real quiet. I took advantage of the lull to examine Pete's wound, and saw that it wasn't serious. The bullet had creased his head in a short straight line about an inch above his left ear. It had stunned him a little at first, but he was perfectly okay. In fact, he had been right in there blazing away

with his Remington along with the rest of us. I had a first-aid kit with me, and I put sulfa on the wound and wrapped a bandage around Pete's head. Then I signaled to the other guys to keep low and fall back into the trees, and we had a quick conference and decided that the only thing to do was to get the hell out of there, fast.

By the time we climbed back up to our lodge on the hill, it was dark. We packed up in record time and piled into my wagon and hauled ass.

TWO

It was eight miles by a dirt road from our lodge down to the highway. You couldn't go fast because the road wasn't much more than a goat path that zigzagged down the side of the hill through dense woods, and if you weren't careful you could break an axle or smash into a tree or a boulder, or even turn over. Normally we took my old army jeep, but it happened to have been in the shop that weekend and we had taken my Ford wagon instead, which was roomier and generally more comfortable inside than the jeep but of course didn't have its guts or its four-wheel drive.

Nobody talked much going down the hill. We passed a bottle of Bourbon around, with warm beer for a chaser, and smoked our heads off. Even though we were all combat veterans and had all been under fire many times and had seen plenty of guys killed and blown to bits right before our eyes—and, in the case of Pete and me, had been seriously wounded in action ourselves, him at Beach Red on D-Day and me up against the Sixth SS Panzer Army in the Ardennes a little later—still we were all shaken up by what had happened at the river. I knew we were all thinking that we wouldn't really breathe easy until we got down off the hill and out of the woods completely, because in our minds we could see very clearly something happening, like suddenly coming around a turn and finding the road blocked and being blinded by lights and then getting riddled like a sieve before we could even get out of the car. Anyway, I noticed that nobody had to be told to keep their windows rolled down and their rifles cradled in their arms, ready for anything. Even Pete, sitting up front with me, had his little P-38, which he always took along in a shoulder rig for snakes, out in the open and cocked.

But we all relaxed when we reached the highway and could see the lights of the gas station down the road and the cars going past. I stopped the car on the shoulder of the highway, and we sat there for a minute with the engine running while they put their guns away. Then we passed the bottle around again.

“Them motherfuckers,” Zeke muttered, looking back at the darkness we had left behind.

It was seventy-six miles back to Maybock, where we all came from. At first I thought we should stop at the gas station and report the shootout from there, but then I thought it would make more sense to go on to Pembroke, which was a town about twenty miles beyond the gas station, and take Pete to the little hospital they had there and call the police from there all at the same time.

On the way to Pembroke we had our first chance to really talk about what had happened. We tried to make some sense out of it but didn’t get anywhere at all. The thing that baffled us was why the guy had shot at us to begin with—and there was no doubt in any of our minds that he had done it deliberately. Nothing could have convinced us that it was a mistake. He had simply raised his rifle and aimed at Pete and fired away, and that was all there was to it.

“I’ve never heard of anything like it in my whole goddam life,” Lou Jonkheer said.

“The son of a bitch just took it into his head all of a sudden to *plink* me,” Pete said.

“He must have gone temporarily insane,” Lou said. “How else could you explain something like that?”

“Well, I’ll tell you one thing,” Zeke said. “He won’t be plinking anybody any more where he is now.”

Everybody laughed.

“He sure as hell won’t,” Bob Lissitzyn said.

“You really took care of the bastard for me, buddy,” Pete said.

“Got him right between the eyes,” Zeke said. “Did you see that?”

“It was one of the prettiest offhand shots I’ve ever seen,” Bob said. “I just wish I’d done it myself, because if there ever was a son of a bitch that deserved to get blasted, it was him.”

“I can’t believe it really happened,” Lou said.

I craned my neck a little to get a look at him in the rear-view mirror. He was slumped way down in the seat next to the window, but I could see his face in the lights of an oncoming car. He looked scared shitless to me.

“It happened all right,” I said.

“I just can’t believe it,” he mumbled.

“I’d hate to see the back of his head,” Zeke said. “I had some of that soft shit in there, you know.”

“Well, he sure as hell deserved it,” Bob said.

“Sure as hell did,” Pete said.

“I just wish I’d done it myself,” Bob said.

“Who’s got the bottle?” Pete said.

“Are you hurting?” I asked him.

“Not much,” he said.

Bob passed him the bottle and he took a healthy pull on it.

“How many rounds did you get off, Rex?” he asked me.

“Half a box,” I said.

“Yeah, you were really pumping it out.”

“I wish to Christ I’d had my AR18,” Zeke said.

“I wish to Christ I’d had my little old Schmeisser,” Bob said.

“How many rounds did you get off, Lou?” I asked.

“Huh?” he said, like a zombie.

“How many rounds did you throw at them, Lou?” I said.

“I don’t know,” he mumbled.

“Did you shoot?”

“Sure I shot,” he mumbled.

“You weren’t scared, were you?”

“Who said anything about being scared?”

“I just wondered, that’s all.”

“I wasn’t scared,” he said.

“Well, what’s the matter with you, then?”

“What do you mean?”

I didn’t answer.

“I’m not scared,” he said. “But I’m goddam worried, I’ll tell you that. What are the cops going to do to us when we report this?”

“Not a goddam thing,” Bob said.

“Yeah?” Lou said. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“When we tell them we killed a guy back there?”

“Not going to do a thing,” Bob said.

“For killing a guy? Nothing? Huh?”

“Wait a minute,” Bob said. “You’ve got it backasswards, don’t you, Louie? You mean, ‘What will the cops do to *them*?’ don’t you? It was *them* that started it, wasn’t it? They shot at *us* first, didn’t they? It was just plain self-defense when *we* fired *back*, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Pete said.

“Goddam right,” Bob said.

“What do you think they’re going to do?” Pete said. “String us up for defending ourselves? What are we supposed to do, stand there and let

every screwball who feels like it use us for target practice? Shit."

"There's not a judge in the country who'd blame you for shooting back in a situation like that," Bob said.

"We haven't got a thing in the world to worry about," Pete said.

"A clear-cut case of self-defense," Bob said.

"I don't know," Lou mumbled.

"What did you say, Lou?" I asked him.

"It's not as simple as that," he mumbled.

"What, Lou?"

"I said it's not as simple as that," he mumbled. "They're not going to see it as simple as that."

"You're a cheerful little bastard, you know it?" Pete said.

"Yeah, he sure is a cheerful little bastard," Bob said.

"I'm just facing the facts, that's all," Lou said. "A man is *dead*."

"He sure is, the prick," Pete said.

"I'll bet he doesn't even *have* a back to his head," Zeke said. "That shit I hit him with was about the consistency of peanut butter. His brains are probably over in Lincoln County."

"Pass me that bottle again," Pete said. "This son of a bitch is beginning to throb like a bastard now."

We passed the bottle around again, and Bob popped open another can of beer and we passed that around.

"Not going to do a goddam thing to us," Bob said.

"Dirty son of a bitches chased us right off our own goddam turf," Zeke said.

"Yeah, our own goddam turf," Bob said. "How many years have we been hunting along that river?"

"Right out of our own goddam *territory*," Zeke said.

"Yeah, our own goddam territory," Pete said.

"Mood I'm in, I feel like turning around and going back after them bastards," Zeke said. "If it was daylight we could cross the river up at the bend and roll them up like Grant took Richmond."

"I'd have my Schmeisser," Bob said, "and I'd stick so much lead up their ass their own mother wouldn't know them."

"Who the hell were they anyway?" Pete said. "Did we ever see them before?"

"Who knows?" Bob said. "They looked sort of like that bunch we passed down by the bend last weekend, but everybody looks the same in camouflage."

"I'd like to find out who they were," Zeke said. "I'd send Stanley and

Ray around to visit each one of them personally. Can you imagine what Ray would do to those guys if I decided to really give him the green light on them?"

"We're going to find out who they were, don't worry," Lou said.

"Is that right, Louie?" Bob said.

"Not going to do a goddam thing to us," Zeke said.

"I'm glad you think so," Lou said.

"What do you think they're going to do to us, Lou?" I asked him.

"I don't know," he said. "But these guys think we're going to call up the cops and report it and they're going to say thanks and that will be the end of it. Well, that's not going to be the end of it. That's just going to be the beginning of it."

"Cheerful little bastard," Bob said.

"I keep telling you, a man is dead," Lou said. "The minute a man is dead there's bound to be a mess. It doesn't make any difference how it happened. There's bound to be a big stinking goddam mess anyway."

"Well, we've got lawyers, don't we?" Pete said. "Do you think Teddy Sloan and Ollie and Jerry Clark and all the rest of the lawyers we know between us are going to let those bastards push us around?"

"I'm just saying there's bound to be a big stinking mess, that's all," Lou said.

"Anyway, I don't see what you're so worried about," Zeke said. "If anybody has a right to be worried it's me, isn't it? It was me that shot him, wasn't it?"

Everybody was quiet after that. Bob opened another bottle of Bourbon and we passed it around and lit up some more cigarettes. We were coming into Pembroke by then, which is a two-bit town where they roll up the sidewalks at eight o'clock and after that they don't want to know anything. There wasn't any traffic and there weren't any people on the streets. Driving along the streets you could see everybody inside the houses sitting around watching TV. The whole Red Chinese Army could have marched through there and they wouldn't even have looked out the window.

I parked near the emergency-room door of the two-bit hospital. The street was dark and silent, and inside the hospital you could see the nurses moving around and the pale glow of the patients watching their TV. Instead of everybody getting out, we all just sat there in the wagon, not saying anything, with our two-day beards, coughing and belching and fuming, and shifting around in our seats, stinking of the booze and the cigarettes. A couple of nurses came out of the emergency-room door

and walked across the street to the parking lot. Ordinarily, whenever Zeke saw a nurse, he always said, “Hey, nurse, I’m worse,” or, “Okay, honey, how about you bending over this time and letting me give *you* an injection?” But this time he didn’t open his mouth, and the nurses got in their car and drove away.

“Shit,” Pete said.

“I wonder what they’ll do to me,” Zeke said, in a kind of blubbery voice. He seemed to have suddenly lost all of his cockiness over his beautiful wing shot. “They’ll probably send me up, won’t they?” he blubbered.

“Cut it out,” Bob said.

“Send my ass to prison for a five-to-ten,” Zeke went on, disregarding Bob and sounding even more blubbery.

“Will you listen to me?” Bob said.

Zeke was a big powerful guy with thick black hair all over him. When you saw him with his shirt off he looked just like a gorilla. He was in the infantry in World War II, and then he went back in for Korea. In World War II he was in North Africa and Sicily, and finished up against Smiling Albert Kesselring at the Rapido. In Korea he was in the first wave ashore at Inchon, which was how he got his second Silver Star.

“I couldn’t stand being in prison,” he blubbered.

“Wait a minute,” Pete said. “I’ve got an idea. What if we just get them to fix up my head here and don’t tell them anything about the goddam shootout?”

“They’d report it,” I said. “They have to report all gunshot wounds, and they’d know that was a gunshot wound.”

“We could say it was an accident.”

“They’d report it anyway.”

“So—”

“Forget it,” I said. “There’s no way the cops wouldn’t make the connection between this and that dead guy.”

“Well, how about this, then?” Pete said. “What if we just go back to Maybock and get Jim to fix my head and just don’t say anything to the cops about anything?”

“Doesn’t make a damn whether we report it or not,” Lou said. “They’re going to trace it to us anyway.”

“I’m not talking to you,” Pete said. “I asked Rex.”

“He’s right, though,” Bob said.

“Why? How are they going to trace it to us?”

“First thing they’d do is collect our brass and then find out the names

of everybody who hunts in that area regularly and go around and match up the brass. For another thing, it just wouldn't be too much of a problem for a good investigator, no matter how you look at it."

"Okay," Pete said. "Why don't we just go in there and get it over with, then?"

But nobody moved.

"Well, we've got to do something," Pete said. "This son of a bitch is really starting to burn now."

"You tell us what we should do, Lou," Bob said. "You're so goddam smart."

"I don't know what the hell we should do," Lou said.

"Five years in the goddam pen," Zeke moaned. "And that's if I'm *lucky*. Do you know how old I'll be when I get out? My whole goddam life will be down the spout."

"Well, let's do something," Lou said.

"Yeah, let's do something," Zeke said.

"I know what I'd like to do," Bob said. "I'd like to go home and get out of these clothes and soak in the bathtub for about three hours with a good stiff highball."

"I'm with you," Zeke said.

"I think I've got a miserable goddam cold coming on," Lou said. "I feel like six pounds of shit in a five-pound bag."

"Some beautiful weekend," Zeke said.

"Yeah, some beautiful weekend," Pete said. "We spend two solid days farting around in the woods and we don't even see a rabbit, much less a deer, I lose sixty-five dollars that I haven't got to you assholes at poker. And then, to make it complete, we get bushwhacked and I wind up with a hole in my head."

"And I get five years for murder three," Zeke said.

"A really beautiful weekend," Pete said.

"Well, we've got to do something," Lou said. "We can't sit here like this all night."

"Yeah, let's do something," Zeke said.

"Maybe we ought to go and call Teddy Sloan or somebody before we do anything," Bob said.

"What about my head?" Pete said. "If somebody doesn't fix it pretty soon they'll probably have to amputate."

"What do you think we should do, Rex?" Bob said.

"Yeah, Rex?" Zeke said.

"Yeah, what do you think, Rex?" Lou said.

“Yeah, Rex?” Pete said.

Which, of course, was what I had known it would come down to in the end. I flicked my cigarette out the window and turned the key in the ignition. I had given them every chance, but it was always the same. They were good guys and the oldest friends I had in the world, but the difference between them and me was that they were born followers, while I was a born leader. They had been waiting all along for me to step in and take charge, and I could tell that they felt much better immediately.

THREE

"We're going to Lou's place," I said.

"Huh?" he said.

"We'll call Jim from there," I said, "and he'll come over and fix Pete's head. Okay, Pete?"

"Okay," he said. "But what's the deal? Aren't we going to report the goddam thing?"

"No."

"No?" Bob said.

"Huh?" Pete said.

"I have a theory," I said.

They couldn't wait to hear about it, but I didn't say one more word until we were back out on the highway, heading for Maybock.

Then I asked Bob to light me a cigarette.

"Okay," he said, giving it to me. "What is it, Rex?"

"I don't think those other guys are going to report it either," I said.

"What?" Bob said.

"You've got to be kidding," Lou said.

"Look at it from their point of view," I said. "They started it, didn't they? Not us. In an investigation they would come out looking even worse than we would, even though we killed a man. At least we would have the argument, like Bob says, of self-defense. What would they have?"

"They wouldn't have shit," Bob said.

"That's right," Zeke said, all excited.

"Wouldn't have shit," Pete said.

"Wait a minute," Lou mumbled. "I don't know."

"Jesus H. Christ," Bob said. "Is that all you know how to say, Lou? 'I don't know.'"

"Let's hear it, Lou," I said.

"They'll report it," he said. "They'll have to. They won't have any choice. Well, what do you think they're going to do? Dig a hole and

stick him in it, and then say they lost him out there in the woods?"

"Yeah, maybe they will," Bob said. "They could do that. Why couldn't they do that?"

"They're not going to do that, Bob," Lou said.

"All right, Louie," Bob said.

"I'm just trying to be realistic," Lou said. "Those guys are going to report the shootout. We just have to face that."

"You're right and you're wrong, Lou," I said. "They're going to report that the guy is dead, yes."

"Huh?" Bob said.

"But not in a shootout," I said.

"Huh?" Zeke said.

"In an *accident*," I said.

It took them a minute to catch on.

"Wow," Bob said.

"Beautiful," Pete said.

"A hunting accident," I said.

"Really beautiful, Rex," Pete said.

"Happens every day," I said. "No investigation, no nothing. Everybody's happy."

"You're wrong," Lou said.

"Why, Lou?" I asked him.

"Because in the first place this sort of shit isn't going to occur to them. In the second place, even if it did, they're going to assume that we're going to report it, and they'll be smart enough to realize, like you said before, that there's no way the cops wouldn't make the connection between the accident and the shootout."

"No, I think this sort of thing will occur to them," I said, "or, rather, already has occurred to them, and I think they're going to assume that we're going to just shut up."

"I don't believe it," Lou said. "Listen, a friend of theirs has been killed. All they're going to have on their minds is going to the cops and telling them what happened and going to the guy's wife and telling her, and everything else is just jerking off."

"You're wrong," I said. "Those guys are sitting in a car right now somewhere just like we are and they're talking this thing over just like we are and coming to the same conclusions that we are."

"What makes you so sure of that?" Lou said.

"Didn't you see them?" I said. "They were just a bunch of middle-aged guys like us, probably been friends all their lives like us, probably are all

veterans like us, come from a town just like ours, go out there hunting around the Sturrup River every goddam weekend in the deer season just like we do."

"Yeah, that's right," Pete said. "They did look just like us, now that you mention it."

"That doesn't mean you can read their goddam minds," Lou said.

"No, but you can come pretty close," I said.

Lou let out a big sigh.

"Okay," he said, "but what if you're wrong?"

"Then I'm wrong," I said.

"And we'll be worse off than if we had gone to the cops in the first place," Lou said. "It puts you in a bad light in the eyes of the law when you don't report something like this, you know. You're already halfway to prison if they have to come looking for you."

"Lou," I said, "this way we have a chance of getting out of it free and clear. I think it's worth taking the chance."

"So do I," Pete said.

"Me too," Zeke said.

"I'm with you, Rex," Bob said.

Lou let out another big sigh.

"Okay," he said.

The last thing I wanted to do was to get stopped by a state trooper, so I didn't push the wagon the way I felt like pushing it but held it steady right at the limit all the way, and it didn't take us long to reach Maybock.

I drove straight to Lou's apartment. He was getting a divorce, so his wife lived in their house and he had taken an apartment.

We all went up to the apartment and I got on the phone and called Jim Wales, who was an M.D. and also a great sportsman and one of our regular hunting buddies. In fact, it was only because of some pressing business that he had had to take care of on Saturday that he had missed coming to Glass Hill with us that weekend. Luckily, he was at home, watching TV with his wife, and when I told him to pack his black bag and come over to Lou's place right away he could tell that it was serious, and he didn't ask any questions but just said okay he'd be there in a minute and hung up.

Waiting for Jim, we all flopped around in the living room looking like a bunch of wild men in our hunting clothes and with our beards and our eyes all bleary from fatigue and from the smoke in the car. We didn't even talk much but just grunted to each other now and then when we

wanted a match or something. Pete was very pale by this time.

It took Jim about fifteen minutes to get there. When he knocked I went and opened the door for him.

"Pete got grazed by a 30-30," I said.

"Whose 30-30?"

"It's a long story," I said. "I'll tell you later."

He nodded and went over to where Pete was sprawled on the sofa and took off the bandage and looked at the wound.

"Okay," he said, "let's get the kitchen table cleared off and I'll work on him in there."

We cleared the table and washed it down quickly with Clorox and then brought in a standing lamp from the living room with a bright bulb in it so Jim could see what he was doing. He made Pete sit down at the table and lay his head down on it. Then he gave him a shot of procaine and shaved the hair around the wound and cleaned it out good. It was a pleasure to see him work. He had the most powerful hands I have ever seen on a man, and he really knew what he was doing. He should have. He was a combat surgeon at Anzio, where he spent seventeen days straight wading around in guts up to his ankles.

In half an hour he had Pete all patched up and stuck full of antibiotics, and he told him he had nothing to worry about.

"Okay," he said, turning to me, "what happened?"

Lou had made a pot of coffee, and we all took a cupful and went back to the living room. While I told him the story Jim listened without saying anything. I was anxious to hear what he thought of my theory. He was smart and cool-headed and his instincts were usually sound. His only trouble was that basically he was just as much of a born follower as the rest of them.

"Jesus," he said when I got through, "that must have been some party while it lasted."

"Pork Chop Hill all over again," Zeke said, grinning.

"Wouldn't you know," Jim said, shaking his head disgustedly, "the one time there was some excitement I'd miss out on it?"

"I just wish I'd had my Schmeisser," Bob said.

"I'd settle for this baby right here," Pete said, taking down a Swiss SIG-AMT assault rifle from its rack on the wall.

Lou had an impressive collection of automatic weapons, which was his pride and joy, and the envy of every gun buff in the state. His specialty was submachine guns and assault rifles, but he had some gorgeous specimens of heavy machine guns too. In fact, he had an

authentic 1889 British Army .303-caliber Vickers Mark I, an original Maxim gun of 1884, plus both the Browning M1917 water-cooled and the M1919 air-cooled, plus a Czech ZB26, the German MG42, and a Soviet RPD. But it was in submachine guns where he really shone. He not only had the Schmeisser MP40 but the earlier MP38, a Sten, both the Soviet PPShM1941 and the PPS1943, and the American M3 and M3A1. Then, from the post-World War II period, he had a Czech M23, an Israeli Uzi, and the Italian Beretta M12. In assault rifles he had everything your heart could desire. He had the German MKb42 (H), the MKb42 (W), and the MP43, plus the Soviet AK, the German-Spanish CETME, the British L1A1, and the American M16 and M24, plus the complete Stoner System.

The interesting thing about the collection was that every single gun in it was in perfect working order. Even the old heavy machine guns could fire, and, at terrific expense to himself, Lou had had a gunsmith take all of the submachine guns and assault rifles that weren't chambered for the standard NATO 7.62 ammo rechambered for 7.62, and with his connection in Chicago that could supply him with the 7.62 in unlimited quantities, he could shoot up all the shit he wanted to, which was what he spent a lot of his free time doing, because he had pulled some strings and gotten his collection classified as a legal educational exhibit, and he went around to gun clubs all over the state and gave them lectures on the history of automatic weapons, and on recoil operation vs. gas operation and blowback operation vs. delayed blowback operation and combined recoil and blowback operation vs. combined gas and blowback operation, etc., and then he would take some of the guys out on the range with him and let them fire the guns.

He kept most of his collection at our local gun club, but he kept a few choice items in his apartment, some of the very late-model stuff like the SIG, an Armalite, an AR180 and the Stoner 63A System. He had the Stoner System in a big specially fitted glass case that had cost him a fortune to have made—but it was worth it because it showed very graphically all of the components for the six different weapons in the system, from the rifle right up through the AR to the machine gun, plus both the plastic and wooden stocks, the bipod, the grenade launcher and the quick-detachable scope, and it showed very graphically how easily all the parts could be assembled and combined and interchanged.

"Pop-pop-pop-pop!"

Pete waved the SIG back and forth, pretending to spray us all with bullets.

"Pop-pop-pop-pop-pop-pop!"

"Hey, be careful with that thing, will you?" Lou said. "It's loaded, you know."

"Pop-pop-Pop-Pop-pop-Pop-pop-pop-pop-pop-pop-pop!"

"Maybe we ought to take that little sweetheart along with us next weekend," Zeke said. "Just to be on the safe side."

"Yeah," Bob said, "but how do we know they won't have an .88?"

Everybody laughed at that.

"Well, what do you think, Jim?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "Like you say, it's worth the chance."

"Now we just have to wait and see what happens," Bob said.

"I wonder how long we'll have to wait," Zeke said.

"Not long," I said. "If they were going to report the thing as a shootout they would have done it by now, and if they did it will be a big enough story that it will be carried on the eleven o'clock news all over the state—maybe all over the country, for that matter."

"Were you listening to the radio in your car?" Jim said.

I nodded. "Nothing."

"Speaking of that," Bob said, "it's just about ten o'clock. Turn on your radio, Lou."

We listened as a disc jockey did the end of his show. Then there were a couple of commercials and finally the news. Nothing.

I suggested that we all go home and have supper and wait for the eleven o'clock news, and if it was bad come back to Lou's place right away and have a meeting and decide what to do next. If, on the other hand, there was still nothing on at eleven concerning the shootout I said that I thought we should forget the whole thing until morning and then meet at Lou's apartment, no matter what, at nine. They all agreed, but before we broke up I made a short speech emphasizing that no one should say a word to anybody about what had happened, and I added that our story about Pete's wound was that he had lost his footing going down a ravine and had fallen and hit his head on a rock.

I took Zeke and Bob with me in my car and dropped them off, and Jim dropped Pete. When I got home I found my wife Ellen and my daughter Pat watching TV. Pat was eighteen and had a lousy little job in a florist shop, and no prospects of marriage whatsoever. Both she and Ellen were TV addicts and both were as fat as pigs. When they watched TV they both had their own special chairs and their own special hassocks to put their feet up on, and there was always a tray on the end table between them loaded with potato chips and clam dip and pie and

cake and ice cream and marshmallow fudge and cocoa and cookies and Coke and Pepsi. I called them Butterball Number One and Butterball Number Two.

Ellen came into the kitchen with me and put the pot roast that she and Pat had had for supper back in the oven to warm it up a little. She made me a fresh salad and put out some apple pie and fixed my Sanka. Then she went back to the TV. By the time I was through eating it was eleven o'clock, and I went into the living room and stood behind Pat's chair to watch the news. Still not a peep about the shootout, and I began to feel better.

I went to the den and cleaned my Remington. Then I went upstairs and took a long hot shower. It was only when I came out of the shower and stood there in the bathroom drying off that it finally hit me how tired I was. I got into bed and fell asleep almost immediately, with the sound of the TV coming to me faintly up the stairs. They loved the talk shows.

FOUR

I got up early the next morning and went out on the lawn in the dew and fetched the paper. I looked through it carefully while the coffee was brewing and couldn't find a thing about either a shootout or somebody getting killed in a hunting accident.

When I went to Lou's apartment at nine, everybody was there already, including Jim Wales, and they looked like a bunch of boys who had just been told that there wouldn't be any school that day. I realized that they expected me to be just as happy and relieved as they were, and at first I tried to act that way, but I didn't feel it and I knew it showed.

It was like some kind of a victory celebration. They were all sitting around drinking black coffee laced with whiskey and talking loudly about the shootout. Pete, a big hero, was ensconced on the couch grinning like an idiot with his head all bandaged up, and Zeke, also a big hero, was telling Jim again how he had snapped off the shot that had caught that miserable bastard across the river right between the eyes.

I took the cup of coffee Lou gave me and stood there and listened as long as I could, and then I got mad and told them to shut up.

They all turned to me with a hurt look on their faces and there was a silence in the room, but I was right. Lou's apartment was in a big old frame house out at the end of Fulton Avenue, which was the main drag in Maybock. Previously the house had belonged to George Zimmermann —who owned the Bank of Maybock, where Bob was a vice president, incidentally—and had been in his family for a couple of generations. But when George and Helen's kids had grown up and moved out, they had built a modern ranch-style home over on Lake Kawagama and sold the old house to Ralph Piper, who, also incidentally, had worked for me for seven years at Jeannette's, my department store there in Maybock, as a shoe salesman before he had suddenly struck it rich and been able to launch himself on a new career as a real estate operator by marrying Beth Steppe, a widow with money from two units of a fried-chicken

franchise out on Route 7 that her husband had left her. Ralph had broken the house up into apartments that he rented mostly to retired people.

Lou was on the second floor, and his windows, which were wide open, were above the porch, where it seemed that most of the old duffers who lived there were always sitting around rocking and shooting the bull, and I was sure they could have overheard much of what had been said if they had been listening. Besides, the walls were only thin partitions.

"We're not out of this thing yet," I said. "Just because there was nothing in the paper this morning and there hasn't been anything on the news, that doesn't mean we're home free. We don't know what might be happening. The police could be on their way here right this minute."

That sobered them up a little, and then I lectured them again about the absolute necessity of our keeping quiet about what had happened.

I left abruptly after that, but Jim came after me and caught up with me as I was going down the sidewalk to my car.

"Are you okay?" he said, putting his hand on my shoulder.

"Yeah, I'm okay."

"Come on, Rex."

"What do you mean?"

"You don't blow your lid like that without a good reason."

"I had a good reason," I said.

"You don't know something we don't know, do you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, you were pretty ferocious."

"I'm always ferocious when my neck is involved," I said. "And, particularly, I don't like other people taking unnecessary risks with it."

"All right," he said. "But, frankly, things look encouraging to me."

"I said we're not out of it yet. That's what I meant."

He shrugged. "Well, anyway, I wish I'd been there to give you guys a little added fire power yesterday."

"We could have used you, Jim," I said.

He gazed at me steadily for a minute, and I got the idea that he wanted to go on but wasn't quite sure of what he wanted to say or how to say it.

So finally I just thanked him again for helping us out the night before and said that I would see him later and got in my car and went on downtown.

My department store, Jeannette's, was at the intersection of Fulton and Maple, right in the center of town. The Bank of Maybock, the

Maybock Arms Hotel and the telephone company were on the other three corners. My dad, Raymond Jeannette, who was a pharmacist, bought the whole block in 1938 and built the old Jeannette's, a combination drugstore and dime store, in 1940. He died in 1945, while I was still in a base hospital in England recovering from getting stitched across the lower abdomen by the SS *Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler*. When I got home I took over the store and operated it the same way my dad had operated it, until 1953, when my mom died. Then I decided to go ahead with an idea that I had been kicking around in the back of my mind for a long time, to turn the place into a real department store instead of a half-assed department store. So I tore down all the buildings on the block and built the new Jeannette's, which is one of the most complete department stores this side of Chicago.

I went up to my office on the third floor, in back of mirrors and pictures, and my secretary came in and we worked for about an hour. After that, I made some business phone calls, and then I went down to the recreation room in the basement for a meeting with my department heads, floor managers and all of the buyers, during which we discussed our plans for the big storewide sale that was to begin on the fifteenth.

After that, I went back up to my office and worked until noon, when I went across the street to the Arms to have lunch as usual with Bob. We sat at our usual table by the window and talked about the stock market and football, and stayed completely off the other subject. As we sat there we saw Maple Street suddenly turn dark. The paper had said that we could expect thundershowers, and it looked as if it was right. Cars began turning on their lights, and then a strong gust of wind swept along the street and people began running and rain lashed against the window.

I thought of something I wanted to ask Bob and looked back at him from the window. He was still looking out at the street, and in the pale rainy light for a minute his face looked different, as if he had aged about twenty years, and it occurred to me that I was seeing him as he would look as an old man. When he looked back at me he paused, with his mouth open, about to say something, and then he seemed to guess what I was thinking because he grimaced, popped his eyes, and rubbed his hand all over his face, pinching it too, as if to get it back to normal.

"What's the matter?" he said.

"Nothing," I said.

He had been voted both Handsomest Boy and Most Popular Boy in our class at Maybock High. I had been voted Boy Most Likely To Succeed.

He was still handsome, and the ladies always made a big fuss over him, even though he had a thin jagged scar that started at the corner of his left nostril and went all the way back to his ear. He got the scar while he was in the Marines, but not in combat, oddly enough, considering that he was at Tarawa. He got it in a jeep collision at Camp Pendleton when he was waiting around to be discharged. He came out a buck sergeant.

I came out of the Airborne a lieutenant. In fact, I was the only one in our bunch, except for Jim naturally, to get a commission. I was commissioned in the field, which is rare of course, after I took over command of my squad when the lieutenant got killed in a mortar barrage, and not only turned back an SS attack with heavy losses to them but then launched a counterattack that took the Krauts completely by surprise and wiped out a machine gun position.

"Why were you looking at me that way?" Bob asked.

"I wasn't aware that I was looking at you any particular way, Bob," I said. "I'm sorry."

He brooded for a minute, and then he leaned toward me and said, "Listen, Paula didn't call you this morning, did she?"

I shook my head.

"She started talking about the job again last night after I got home. You can imagine how much of a mood I was in for talking about that. So one thing led to another and we had words, and she got really quite adamant about it. I tell you, Rex, she has that job on the brain."

Paula was Bob's second wife. His first wife, Peggy, whom he had known since high school and had married right after he got out of the Marines, had died of blood poisoning. Three years later he met Paula. She was a receptionist in Jim's office at the time, very good-looking and with a terrific figure, and only twenty-three, which meant that there was a difference of twenty-two years in their ages. Still, everything went smoothly between them as far as I knew, until she came to me at the store one day and asked if I had some sort of a job for her that would be interesting, because, she said, she had been getting restless lately just hanging around the house all day without much to do. And I, in all innocence, thinking that I was really doing them a big favor, said that fortunately I happened to be looking for someone right then to take charge of the cosmetics department down on the main floor and she was welcome to the job if she wanted it.

I say "doing them a big favor" because, frankly, the job was a plum. It paid well and was considered by the women in the store pleasant,

prestigious and rather chic. In fact, there were any number of women who worked for me already who wanted it and were much better qualified for it than Paula and deserved it more than she because of long faithful service. But I offered it to her, thinking that she would enjoy it and could probably handle it adequately, and knowing that the extra income would be helpful. Everybody knows that vice presidents of banks don't make a lot of money, but Bob was extremely sensitive about it, especially after he married Paula, and was always trying desperately to supplement his salary by doing outside consulting and playing the stock market, mostly on the margin.

Paula was eager to have the job, but when she told Bob about it he refused to let her take it. So she was bitterly disappointed, and he was furious with both her and me for having even discussed the matter to begin with. And that was how I became involved in a situation that rapidly became serious, complicated and threatening from several points of view.

In the first place, before Paula had come to see me that day about the job I had hardly known her at all. Then, suddenly, I was all mixed up with her. She came back the next day to tell me what Bob had said and to tell me how sorry she was. Then, against my principles and my better judgment, I told her not to lose hope quite yet because I would talk to Bob myself and see if I couldn't get him to change his mind. But even though I made a big pitch about what a good job it was and how much fun it would be for Paula, Bob just got more adamant about it. I thought the deal was off then, but I was wrong. Paula called me the next day to ask if the job was still open, because she thought she might take it after all. I had a feeling I knew what had happened, although she didn't say anything to that effect—that she and Bob had had a fight, and the upshot of it was that she had said that she was going to take the job whether he liked it or not. I said, yes, the job was still open. Then she asked me if, as a great favor to her, I would keep it open for a few days. I said I would, and the minute I said it I knew I was on dangerous ground.

I realized that I should have ended the thing at that point and that I could have done it in good conscience. I owed nothing to Paula, and she knew she had no right to expect any favors from me. On the other hand, Bob was an old friend, and to make the promise was to betray him. Also, in making the promise, I let Paula see that I was vulnerable to her.

She came to my office the morning after the phone call, and we had a long talk in which she confirmed my suspicions about their having had a

row over the job. She said that she wanted to let things cool off for a little while and then try to talk Bob into reconsidering. I told her not to worry too much about missing out on the job, because, I gave her to understand, I would keep it open for her more or less indefinitely. That made her happy. In the next couple of weeks she called me several times. The idea was that she was supposed to be giving me reports of her progress with Bob, but actually most of the time we didn't talk about the job, or about Bob. We just talked. I found her exciting.

Speaking of which, I kept a girl in Newberry, a town about twenty-five miles from Maybock. I plucked her out of the credit department in the store, the same place where I had found the two before her. Her name was Mary Probst. She wasn't exciting. She just served the purpose.

"Don't put me in the middle, Bob," I said.

He shrugged. "I just don't like her bugging you, that's all."

"She's not bugging me," I said.

"Okay."

We parted on that rather sour note. Bob ran back to the bank through the driving rain, and I caught a taxi and went the seven blocks, which I normally walked, to the Athletic Club, where I met Jim and we played our usual hard-nosed brand of handball for about an hour.

It had stopped raining by the time we left the club, and I walked back to the store. But instead of going up to my office, I obeyed a strong impulse and turned around and went across the street and got my car out of the garage and drove out of town, heading west on Route 7, which was the road that led to Glass Hill. When I reached the next sizable town, Sellwood, I went into a drugstore and asked the woman at the counter if they had a local newspaper there. She said they did but it was only a weekly and they were all sold out, and the new edition wouldn't be published until Thursday. I drove on to Martinsburg, which was slightly bigger than Sellwood and did have a dinky daily newspaper, the *Courier*, I bought a copy and sat in my car and went through it carefully. I couldn't find anything.

It began raining again then, very hard, and I turned around and went back to Maybock.

It was late when I reached the store, and I just hung around chatting with various employees until closing time. Then I went home and had a martini and watched the news on TV. Nothing.

We had baked ham Hawaiian style for supper. Ellen was a very good cook and it was excellent, but I hardly touched my food. She asked me if I felt all right. I didn't know what to say. I had a cast-iron stomach, so I

seldom failed to have a good appetite. Finally I just said that I had had some problems that day at the store that were bothering me a little and let it go at that.

Monday nights were my Guard nights, so I took a bath and put on my uniform and drove over to the armory. I was a major in the Guard and commanding officer of the local unit, a component of an infantry regiment. The rain had stopped and it had turned cold and the opening formation was a disgrace with all the men, big babies every one of them with their God-awful mustaches and their hair down to their gonads, acting as if they were freezing to death and bitching and bellyaching and deliberately fouling up on all the commands. I got disgusted, and after the formation I turned the whole thing over to Captain Lucci, my second-in-command, and left.

Usually, I went over to Newberry to see Miss Probst for an hour or two on Monday nights after Guard, but she had called me to say that she had to go and visit her mother in Aurora and wouldn't be back until Wednesday. So I went on home and spent the rest of the evening in my shop down in the basement, refinishing the stock of a three-banded Enfield percussion musket that I had bought recently and was in the process of restoring.

When it came to collecting, I was strictly a black-powder man. I had a Kentucky pistol, a Colt 1860 .44, a Navy 1861 .36, a Colt Walker .44, a Harper's Ferry Model 1806 flintlock and the Model 1855 .58 Dragoon pistol, a Wells Fargo, a .58 buffalo gun, and a lot of other very fine stuff, all original and all in perfect working order. I often participated in black-powder shoots around the state and had a pile of trophies that I kept in a glass case over the mantelpiece in the den.

At eleven o'clock I went upstairs and watched the news on TV with Ellen and Pat. Nothing.

FIVE

The next morning there still wasn't anything in the paper.

I went to the store but didn't stay very long. I got started doing some dictating and then broke off abruptly in the middle of a letter to Bill Watson, a suit manufacturer in Reading, Massachusetts, and told my secretary that I had just remembered an important appointment. I knew that I must have looked a little peculiar because she gave me a worried glance. My behavior around the office was usually anything but erratic.

I got my car out of the garage and started driving west on Route 7 again, and I didn't stop until I reached Pembroke. They had a daily newspaper there, and I bought the issue of that day from a rack on the street and found a copy from the day before in a drugstore. Neither one of them had anything in it.

I drove west again, and pulled over onto the shoulder of the highway when I came to the place where you turned off to get onto the dirt road that went up to our lodge on Glass Hill. I sat there in the car, gazing at the hill, and thinking of Sunday, while the cars whizzed past me on the highway. It was a bright, clear, crisp, cold, windy day. The hill looked beautiful with the leaves all shimmering ted and gold in the wind.

My dad bought 1,200 acres on Glass Hill in 1930. He left that to me along with the store. To my older brother Ken he just left some money. We were very close, my dad and me, and the thing, I think, that made us so close was that we both loved guns and hunting so much. Ken never gave a rap about that. In fact, he despised it. He was such a weird guy anyway. He went and lived in New York City for several years, where he failed miserably at trying to be an actor. He never got one single part in the entire time. Then he went and lived in Paris, where he got hooked on French history and wrote a book about Robespierre, which I have never read. He wound up finally teaching at Michigan State. I saw him and his snotty, bitchy Radcliffe wife maybe once or twice a year.

And the strange part was that it turned out almost exactly the same way with me and my two boys, Davie and Michael. Davie, the younger

one, loved hunting, while Michael, the older one, hated it. And Davie and I were always very close, while Michael and I never got along at all.

I taught Davie how to shoot a .22 as soon as he was strong enough to hold one properly, and he was a crack shot from the beginning. I gave him a shotgun on his twelfth birthday and a deer rifle on his thirteenth, and there was nothing on this earth he liked better than going out gunning with me and Pete and Lou and Jim and Bob and Zeke in the woods around Glass Hill—while Michael was either sitting in his room smoking cigarettes, reading dirty books and playing with himself, or lounging in the park with the most degenerate kids in town. He went to Wisconsin, got kicked out in his junior year for some kind of subversive activities, but stayed right on in Madison rather than come home and face the music. When the college informed me that he had been booted, I tried to get in touch with him, naturally, but he wouldn't answer letters or telegrams and wouldn't take any phone calls, and when I went up there to get him and bring him home, he hid out on me. So I cut him off without a dime and six months later sent a detective to Madison to find out what he was up to. The detective reported back to me that my son was living in a hippie pad that was so filthy it should have been condemned, smoking pot and taking LSD, speed and Christ knows what else, had grown a big bushy beard and a big bushy head of hair, never wore anything but beads and sandals and some kind of a goddam thing that looked like a sarong, and was known to the local police as a campus agitator. Davie, on the other hand, never got into trouble of any kind, got letters in football, baseball and basketball in high school, and won a full athletic scholarship to Southern Cal, which was where he was when all of this happened.

In fact, it was because Davie loved hunting so much that I had decided to build the lodge. Before that, we had always used tents, but this was something permanent that I wanted for Davie and me and my friends, that I could pass on to Davie and he could enjoy with his kids and his friends and he could pass on to his kids.

Of course, at that time, when I built the lodge, I had no idea what was going to happen to the area around Glass Hill and the Sturrup River. How was I to know that in a few years it would be almost hunted out? There had always been so much game in those woods. They had always been alive with black bear, moose, deer, lynx, wildcats, porcupines, foxes, hares, rabbits, squirrels, opossums, minks, weasels, skunks, raccoons, woodchucks. But it just seemed like every year after I built the lodge more and more hunters kept crowding in and the game kept

thinning out until it got to a point where all you ever seemed to see out there in the woods was other hunters, and finally you even stopped seeing many hunters.

So my friends and I would go into the woods and find nothing but emptiness and silence. When was the last time anybody had killed a moose around there? When was the last time anybody had killed a bear? When was the last time anybody had killed a lynx or a wildcat? Hell, we'd be lucky to kill half a dozen deer between us all season. Sometimes, like that last weekend, we went the whole time without killing even a shitty little raccoon.

Sometimes we would get so frustrated by it all that, I have to admit, we shot just about anything that moved, no matter what, in season or out of season, buck or doe, undersized or oversized, because we'd come a long way and had been tramping around in the woods since dawn, and we were goddam bitter and disappointed.

Sometimes we'd even go to the private bird preserves, where you could kill all the pheasant, grouse and quail you wanted on a per-bird-killed basis, or the private game preserves, where you could kill an eight-point-or-better whitetail deer for about a hundred dollars, and a couple of times Jim and I went to a very high-class preserve in New Mexico, where you could kill all the exotic imported stuff like greater kudu, ibex, desert gazelle, Barbary sheep, mouflon, sika and axis deer, gemsbok, fallow deer and black-buck on a straight guaranteed no-kill no-pay basis.

But the trouble with the preserve hunting was that it wasn't much like real hunting. It was more like shooting cattle in a pen, and when you came home with a beautiful trophy head like of a black buck or a kudu that had probably cost you, all told, around fifteen hundred dollars, you couldn't really feel anything for it and didn't really care about it the way you should have been able to for that kind of money.

So my friends and I kept coming back to Glass Hill and just hoping and praying that the deer would make a big comeback and everything would make a big comeback, and once in a while, when we were most discouraged, we would kill a deer or hear about somebody around there who had, and that would keep us going for another weekend.

I got back on the road and continued going west. Pretty soon I came to the bridge over the Sturrup River. The bridge was about twenty miles from where we had had the shootout. I looked down at the water as I crossed the bridge. The water was brown and sluggish. An old guy was drifting along in a rowboat, fishing with a cane pole and a bobber. What

did he think he was going to catch? The river was polluted. I felt sorry for him, but then I thought that maybe he knew the trout were all gone and was just killing time.

I stopped at all the towns I came to on the other side of the river. Reed City. Fowlerville. Anderson. Stirling. But didn't turn up anything. Finally, around three o'clock in the afternoon, I reached Clinton, a town of about the same size as Maybock, and on the obituary page of the local paper there was a notice about a man named Edward M. Graham who, it said, had been killed on Sunday in a hunting accident. Age forty-eight. Born in Cleveland. Civil engineer. City employee. Longtime resident of Clinton. Graduate of Northwestern, Veteran. Survived by wife, three children.

I looked up Edward M. Graham in the phone book and called the number. While the phone rang I flicked through the pages of the book until I found a name I liked. Sutton. A woman answered.

"Is this Mrs. Graham?" I asked.

"Who's this?"

"My name is Frank Sutton, Mrs. Graham," I said. "I know this is a very sad time for you and I don't like to disturb you, but I just wanted to call you up and tell you that I was a friend of your husband's at Northwestern and tell you how sorry I am to hear about what happened."

"What was your name again, sir?"

"Frank Sutton."

"I don't think I know you, do I, sir?"

"No."

"Do you work for the city?"

"No, I don't. In fact, I don't even live here in Clinton. I live in Akron, but I'm here visiting my married sister for a few days and I just happened to see the notice in the paper this morning, and I thought to myself that that must be my old friend Ed Graham, because we kept in touch for a while after college, and from the alumni bulletins and whatnot I knew that he was living here in Clinton and working for the city."

"Oh."

"I just wanted to tell you how sorry I am."

"Well, thank you."

"He was a great guy, Mrs. Graham."

"Well, it was a lovely service, I can tell you that, sir. A very, very lovely service."

"I'm glad to hear that, Mrs. Graham."

"Ed had many friends, you know."

"Well, he was very popular in college, I remember."

"I've never seen such flowers. Such wreaths and arrangements. And even the sky was blue, after that bad storm yesterday."

"It must have been very beautiful," I said.

"It was a military service, of course. Ed was a veteran, with many wonderful ribbons and medals and decorations. He was in the Pacific, you know. And he was a member of the Legion, of course. In fact, he was a past commander of the Harold B. Wald Post, which is one of the local posts here, and that's why they gave him an extra-special send-off this morning. I've seen the regular thing they do. They come in shirtsleeves or sweaters or something, with maybe just their uniform pants and caps on, and they play the taps on a tape recorder and fire the volleys over the grave with these little chrome-plated rifles they have that look like toys. But for Ed they came in their full uniforms and brought a boy from the Drum and Bugle Corps to play the taps *live* and fired the volleys with *real* bullets in *real* rifles. Tom Stritch told me afterwards that they could have been arrested for that, but anyway it was very lovely."

"I'll bet it was," I said.

"I'm drinking."

"Pardon?"

"I'm up here in my room with the door locked, sitting stark naked on the bed and I've already had three scotches."

"That's all right," I said.

"You sound nice. Are you sure we haven't met?"

"I'm positive."

"I wasn't even going to answer the phone. I put it under the pillow, but then I heard it ringing and I thought I'd better go ahead and answer it. You must have known Marshall, then."

"Who?"

"Marshall Flynn. He was Ed's roommate at Northwestern."

"Oh, yes, I thought the name rang a bell," I said.

"Marshall was the main reason why Ed came here to live in the first place, actually. This is Marshall's home town. They were always such great friends, and they both loved hunting. They were together on Sunday, of course."

"How did it happen, Mrs. Graham?"

"Ed was deer hunting with Marshall and the rest of his usual hunting

buddies over near the Sturrup River. That was their favorite hunting ground, even though there never was anything to shoot at around there any more. All of a sudden a bullet came from among the trees on the other side of this clearing where they were standing and hit Ed right between the eyes. It was just a stray bullet, Marshall says. They never saw anybody. Anyway, he died instantly. There wasn't any pain or anything, and there's one thing I know. If he had to die, that's the way he would have wanted it. Out there in the woods with his old friends. He really loved his guns and his hunting, and maybe God had it worked out this way all along. That's what Father Bernard said at the service, and who knows? God certainly must have known how much Ed loved his guns and his hunting. That's for sure. But, frankly, that being the case, and I truly believe it was, I don't understand why He couldn't have put some black bears back into the woods for him. Ed was a man who dearly loved bears. He got one when he was only thirteen years old that weighed over five hundred pounds. Think of that. Little kid out with his first gun kills a bear twenty times as big as he was. He had a picture of him and the bear together, but we lost it in the fire. Oh, he liked deer and all the rest of it, of course, but in his heart it was bears he truly loved. And the last time he got one was about six years ago, and it was only about the size of a cat. Are you a hunter, sir?"

"Yes, I am," I said.

"And do you like bears?"

"Yes, I do," I said.

"When was the last time you got one?"

"Seven years ago," I said.

"And how big was it?"

"About the size of a cat."

"Then you know what I'm talking about. And as if that wasn't enough, then he had to put up with all this bleeding-heart gump from the Honorable Edward Marlowe Graham, Jr. You know who I mean, don't you?"

I had thought the name sounded familiar.

"Was that—?"

"That's right," she said. "But you didn't see anything in the obituary about him, did you? You didn't see anything about him attending the service today, did you? That's because they were bitter. So I get a little telegram from him. He's sorry but he just can't make it. Well, you know how he got elected, don't you? You know who put him in there, don't you? The hippies, the junkies, the jigs, the Mafia, the ACLU, the ecology

nuts and the antigun nuts, but mostly the ecology nuts and the antigun nuts. That's the kind of power they have today. And then him turning on his own father, this punky kid who I'm frankly ashamed of, even if he is where he is, even if he is my only male child—and disowning his own father because Dad *embarrassed* him by going right on being the president of the Clinton Shooting Club and being in the forefront against all the new gun laws that his own son was trying to force down the throat of the American people. What does it say in the Second Amendment of the United States Constitution? Or doesn't that mean anything any more? 'A well regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed.' Was that just a clerical error? Isn't the language plain enough? Was that just something that was sneaked in by the colonial gun lobby?"

"I know what you mean," I said.

"My husband worked hard all his life," she said. "And then when he wanted a little recreation he had to put up with all this gump. The wildlife was put here on this earth for two reasons. They were put here to provide meat for man and to provide recreation for man. Do you agree with that, or don't you?"

"I agree," I said.

"Nen he had to put up with all this old gump about how the hunters inflict all this suffering on the wildlife when they shoot them, when it's a known fact that it's an entirely different thing when you shoot a deer or a bear or a raccoon or a duck than it is when you shoot a man, because an animal doesn't suffer. To suffer you have to have a soul and a mind and intelligence. They don't have a soul, they have a brain about the size of a pea, and they don't have any more intelligence than a jackrabbit. They're called *dumb animals*. Why in the name of the sweet Lord Jesus do you think they're *called* that? Because they're *dumb*. They don't even know enough to get in out of the rain. Do you agree with that?"

"I agree," I said.

"Gump," she said.

"That's right," I said.

"No two ways."

"I think you're right," I said.

"Nen he comes in here and tells Dad that it's a *sacrilege* to think of a deer or a leopard or even a stinking little opossum as a *target*. Have you ever heard that one?"

"I've heard it," I said.

"What on earth else are you supposed to think of them as? Dad told him he ought to go and live in India or wherever it is where they worship the animals and let the cows shit in the street until the cars can't even get through. I don't have to tell you what's in back of it all, do I? I think you're smart enough to know that it doesn't have anything to do with wildlife, aren't you? This is all just part of a big plot to disarm the American household so that the junkies, the hippies and the jigs can come in and beat the life out of you and then rape you and then shoot you full of holes, while their buddies are downstairs taking out your TV so they can sell it to get more heroin. What do you say?"

"I say you're right," I said.

"Well, I've got news for you. Do you know what I've got here on the night table right beside me?"

"What have you got, Mrs. Graham?"

"A little old Smith and Wesson .357 Magnum."

"That's a nice gun," I said.

"Don't tell me that won't stop a man."

"It sure will," I said.

"Well, I've got news for you. One of the first things Ed did after we got married was take me down to the range and teach me how to shoot this thing. And I can shoot it, believe me. And then Ed told me that if ever sometime he wasn't here and I had to defend myself, the first effing nigger or hippie or junkie that comes through that door I'm to blow his effing head off, and that's what I'm going to do. Do you believe me, or not?"

"I believe you," I said.

"Well, I think I'm going to have another drink now."

"I don't blame you," I said.

"Well, it was an honorable death, in a way, don't you think? Sort of like being killed in the war, don't you think?"

"I think so," I said.

"Well, I'm going to say good-by now. Good-by."

"Good-by," I said.

I looked up the name Marshall Flynn in the phone book. It gave the name in regular type and an address and phone number, and then right under that in heavy type it said Marshall Flynn Tire Company and gave four locations. I asked the man at the cigar counter which of the locations was nearest. He gave me directions to the one on Oak Street, which, he said, was not only the nearest but also happened to be the

original location. He seemed to be very proud of the fact that he knew that.

It was a fairly big deal. Besides tires, there was a long row of bays where they did brakes and alignment and tailpipes and mufflers. Out in front there were gas pumps. There were plenty of cars on the lot and customers standing around jingling the money in their pockets while they waited to get service, and in general business looked very good. I stopped at one of the gas pumps and told the kid to fill it up. While he was doing that, I went into the office to get a Coke. Along the wall over the cash register there was a tow of framed pictures. Most of the pictures were of navy fighters from World War II. Hellcats or something. Other pictures were of aircraft carriers.

There was one close-up picture of a young man in a flying helmet and goggles sitting in the cockpit of a fighter, wearing a big grin and holding his thumb up. Painted below the cockpit were six Jap flags and a silhouette of a ship.

The kid came in and found me drinking the Coke and looking at the pictures.

“The boss licked the Japs single-handed,” he said.

I looked at him, but he wasn’t being wise.

“He’s one tough son of a bitch,” he said. “That’s seven fifty-five for the gas.”

SIX

Dusk had fallen when I got back to Maybock. I went straight to Lou's place. His windows were dark but I saw his car parked at the curb, so I knew he was there, and I went upstairs and knocked on the door. There was a short pause during which I heard low voices, which meant that he had his girl friend Joanne in there with him. Finally he came to the other side of the door and asked who it was. Then he opened up.

"I want to talk to you alone," I said.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Get her out of here," I said.

He looked back at Joanne, who was in the bedroom, standing in front of the mirror over the bureau, putting on lipstick.

"Hi," she called to me, wiggling her fingers at me in the mirror.

I wiggled my fingers back.

"Go on," I said to Lou.

He shrugged, looking uncomfortable. "We were just going out to eat. Listen, what's the matter anyway?"

"I just want to tell you something."

He shrugged again.

"Okay. I'll tell her to go down and wait on the porch."

He was barefoot and his shirttail was hanging out. He picked up a drink and a cigarette that he had left on an end table and went into the bedroom. He said something to her, and then he looked back at me and gave me a sign that it was all right. So I made myself a drink and sat down in the living room to wait for her to leave.

She worked in the notions department at Jeannette's. It was because of her that he was getting divorced. He had met her one night in a bar while his wife Dot was in the hospital getting her hysterectomy. She was thirty-one. He was forty-nine. Dot was forty-six. He ran around with Joanne for about six months before Dot found out what was going on, or maybe she knew before that but kept her mouth shut, hoping that he would get it out of his system. No soap. He was wild about Joanne. But

it was going to cost him plenty. They had six kids altogether, but two of them were still minors.

Joanne wasn't beautiful, but she was pretty in a fox-faced sort of way. She had no tits to speak of, not much of an ass, and long skinny legs. She was as blind as a bat and wore big square, silver-rimmed, amber-tinted glasses, but still squinted anyway. When she smiled she had a big mouth, and you could see that most of her teeth in back were in bad shape.

Lou was a printer. He had his own shop, which was one of the two or three biggest in town. He had reddish-grayish hair, a round waxy-looking face and slightly bucked teeth. For some reason he looked much smaller than he really was. In fact, Joanne was only about an inch taller than he but seemed to tower over him when you saw them together.

He came out of the bedroom, and a minute later she came out, looking even more nervous than he did. She said, "Hi," and wiggled her fingers at me again. I said, "Hello," and Lou went with her to the door and saw her out.

"She's such a damned good kid," he said to me when he came back.

One afternoon when I happened to be down in notions, I fell into conversation with her. I was feeling horny and there was something vaguely appealing about her, so I invited her up to my office, where I gave her a drink and she gave me a blow job. This was before she and Lou actually started going steady, and I never messed around with her again, but I knew her and I knew that all I would have had to do was snap my fingers and I could have had her again any time I wanted to.

He stood in front of me, rubbing his hands together the way he always did when he was nervous.

"Bad news?" he said.

I shook my head.

He gave me a worried look. He was impatient for me to tell him what I had come to tell him, but he knew that I didn't like to be rushed when I had something important to say. He turned away and went and made himself another drink, and then came back and perched on the arm of the chair across from me.

He still hadn't turned on any lights, so it was pretty dark in the room.

"I think we're absolutely safe now, don't you?" I said.

He didn't know what to say. He was suspicious.

"Well, this is two full days," I said. "If anything was going to happen it would have happened by now, right?"

"Yeah, I guess so," he said.

“So I was right, then, wasn’t I?”

“Huh?”

“Well, you doubted me when I said that I thought we could predict what they would do. Well, that’s exactly what they must have done. Hunting accident. Boom. The end. Right?”

He shrugged.

“So I was right, then, wasn’t I?”

“Okay.”

“Well?”

“Yes, yes,” he said irritably.

“I want you to admit it, Lou.”

“I said yes, didn’t I?”

“Okay.”

I let him wait again, wondering what was coming. And I knew that he knew me well enough to know that something was coming. “Lou, this is what I want to tell you—”

He looked up.

“Yeah?”

“Lou, I think those guys—”

“Yeah?”

“I think those guys will be back there again next weekend, waiting for us.”

“What!”

He leaned forward suddenly, trying to see me better in the dim light.

“What do you mean, Rex?”

“What do you think I mean?”

“Waiting for us for *what*?”

“You know what,” I said.

“Christ Almighty!”

“Believe me,” I said.

“Good God!”

He stood up and then sat down again.

“No, no, no,” he protested. “I don’t believe it. No, no, no. Absolutely no.”

I didn’t say anything.

“Rex, you don’t really believe that, do you?”

I let him stew.

“Rex?”

“What’s the matter, Lou?” I said.

The fact was I had always suspected him of being yellow. Which was

ironic, because of all of our bunch he was the one who held the highest decoration for bravery—the Distinguished Service Cross, the next thing to the Congressional Medal of Honor itself—while the best all the rest of us had done was Zeke and me with our Silver Stars. Still, I was convinced that he was yellow. Oh yes, it was perfectly true that he had been at Saint-Lô, and yes, it was true that he had a citation describing what he was supposed to have done to deserve the medal. But I just couldn't help remembering that I had known him all through junior high school and senior high school and college and that in my own experience with him it had seemed that every time there had been a possible way to back out of a fight he had taken it. The others had been aware of this characteristic of his too, but right after the war, whenever the subject of Lou and his DSC had come up, they had always seemed to have been able to find some explanation, like, yes, he had been kind of yellow when he was a kid but that a lot of people are like that until the chips are really down in a life-and-death situation and then they're entirely different.

I thought they were all just too easily taken in. The whole thing had a stink to it as far as I was concerned.

Of course I had never said it to anyone, but I had always suspected that there must have been some kind of typical army foul-up at Saint-Lô, and the guy who had been the real hero that day had been killed or something and they had given the medal to Lou by mistake. It wouldn't have been the first time something like that had happened.

"I just wanted to tell you," I said.

I put my glass down on the table beside my chair and started to get up.

"No, wait," he mumbled.

He looked bewildered. He sat there frowning and blinking at me, with his fingers pressed softly against the corner of his mouth.

"You don't really think they'd bushwhack us, do you, Rex?"

"Yeah, I think they would," I said.

"Jesus!"

"And I also wanted to find out if you're going to come along this weekend anyway."

"Huh? Well, I don't know. What about the other guys?"

"I don't know," I said. "I came to you first."

"Well, do you think they'll want to go if there's something like this going on?"

I shrugged.

“The only thing I’m sure of at this point,” I said, “is that *I’m* going. Even if I have to go alone.”

He jumped toward me again.

“Why, Rex? Why get right back into the goddam thing when we just got out of it by the skin of our ass? Why take chances? How do you know they won’t blow your head off? Why don’t we just cool it this weekend?”

“You know I’m not built that way, Lou,” I said.

“You want to get your head blown off?”

“Lou, if I think they’re going to be there waiting for me, I’ll be there.”

He blinked at me again.

“Oh well, of course you don’t know if they’ll be there,” he said, changing his tune, trying to sound indifferent. “You say you think so, but you don’t really know.”

“That’s true,” I said.

“And I don’t think they will be.”

“So?”

“So—”

“Well, then, there’s nothing to worry about, is there?”

He looked sour.

“So?”

“What?”

“Will you be coming?”

“I don’t know. I mean I really just think we ought to cool it this weekend.”

“Then how about next weekend?”

“What?”

“Well, how many weekends do you think we should cool it for, Lou?”

He shook his head.

“You really think they’re going to try to bushwhack us, Rex?”

“We killed a friend of theirs, didn’t we?” I said. “I think they’ll want to even the score.”

“But, Rex, that’s trying to read their minds again. You don’t know how people will think. I think they’ll be just as glad to get out of it as we are.”

“Well, like I say, if that’s the case there’s nothing to worry about, then, is there?”

He looked away.

“Rex, I just don’t think we ought to take any unnecessary chances, that’s all.”

I let my teeth show a little then.

"Well, Lou, I don't think we ought to take any unnecessary chances either," I said. "What kind of a jerk do you take me for anyway? Do you think I'm going out there on Saturday morning with my finger stuck in my ass and let them pick me off like a clay pigeon? Do you seriously think I'd let you or any of the other guys who went along with me walk into an ambush?"

He put his hand over his eyes.

"That's playing me pretty cheap, isn't it?" I said.

"I didn't mean it that way," he said. "You know that."

"That's how it came out," I said.

"Well, I'm sorry, but that isn't how I meant it, Rex."

"Let me tell you something," I said. "If those guys are out there waiting for us on Saturday it's going to be a sorry day for them, because when I get through with them they're going to wish they'd never been born, because what they don't know is that this kind of shit happens to be right up my street. And let me tell you something else. When I and whoever goes with me leave here on Saturday morning we're going to be ready for any contingency, and I mean *any* contingency."

For a minute Lou didn't say anything, and then he stood up and mumbled something and began walking around the room with his head down and the heel of his hand up against his forehead. I couldn't help thinking how pathetic he looked, in a blue funk just at the thought of what might happen, and behind him on the wall his Stoner 63A System in its beautiful glass case.

"Listen, I've got to go," he said. "Joanne—"

"Okay," I said.

Suddenly he ran over toward me, with his face all twisted up in anger.

"Hey, you're just screwing around with me, aren't you?" he said, pointing his finger at me. "Why does it always have to be me, Rex? You never pick on anybody else, do you?"

I just stared at him.

"This is all a crock of shit, isn't it?" he said. "You don't really believe any of this shit, do you? You just came around here and dropped this load of shit on me just to see what I'd say, isn't that true?"

I just kept on staring at him.

"Why don't you leave me alone?" he said.

"Okay, Lou," I said. "I'll leave you alone."

I didn't hurry, though. I picked up my glass and took one more swallow, stood up, paused, put out my cigarette with a good deal of

deliberation, and then glanced around the room, as if, perhaps, for the last time.

All the while, Lou watched me, but when I started for the door he tried to block my way.

"Wait," he said. "I didn't mean to get mad."

"That's all right," I said.

"Rex, wait just a second longer, will you?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I can't," I said. "I should have been home long ago."

"Listen," he said desperately, "it's just that I had a bad scene with Dot today. She came into the shop this morning and carried on like a crazy woman in front of everybody. And I haven't had a thing to eat since breakfast. See what I mean?"

"Sure, Lou," I said.

"I mean I'm just so fucked up right now. I don't know, sometimes I actually have the feeling that I'm going to go out of my mind with all the pressures I have on me right now. I'm not just saying this, Rex. In fact, when Dot came in there this morning I really began to feel sort of like I was going to go to pieces right in front of her and everybody else. And I've been worried about Sunday too, naturally, and then you come in here now and tell me this and I don't know what to think."

"Lou, I've really got to be going," I said.

"Will you wait just a second, Rex?"

"I'm afraid I can't."

"Listen, I wasn't saying that I wouldn't go with you."

"What were you saying?"

"I'm just saying that I think we ought to take a little time and think about it and all of us get together and talk it over."

He was standing with his back to the door by this time, breathing hard, and the only way I could have gotten past him would have been to knock him on his ass.

"Let me out," I said.

"Can we talk about this some more, Rex?"

"Let me out."

"Can I call you tomorrow?"

"Yeah, you can call me tomorrow," I said, "but right now I want you to get out of my way."

"I'll feel better tomorrow," he said.

He opened the door for me and I went out into the hallway.

"Tell Joanne I'll be right down, will you?" he said.

“Yeah,” I said.
He pursued me a little way down the hall in his bare feet.
“Listen, I’m *sorry*,” he said.

SEVEN

The next morning, Wednesday, I went to see Zeke. Technically, he was a barber. He owned the shop in the basement of the Arms. But I guess almost everybody in town knew that the back room was a horse parlor.

There were four chairs, Zeke's, Bill's, Fred's and Tony's. Bill and Tony were working when I came in. Fred was drinking coffee out of a paper cup and reading the paper. Al, the shoeshine boy, picked his nose thoughtfully while he flipped through a comic book. As usual in the morning, the color TV was turned on and there was a picture, but the sound was off.

Zeke's dad, Carl, who was seventy-eight years old, occupied his customary post, a high stool that was placed back up against the wall behind Zeke's Number 1 chair and next to the cash register and the pay phone. To all intents and purposes, his job was to be the cashier and to take the calls that came in on the pay phone, which were legitimate calls and had nothing to do with the betting. The betting phones were in the back room. But his real job was to watch the men who came in, and if they asked to be allowed to go into the back room and they were known to him and were all right, to push a concealed button that was in a cubbyhole under the cash register, along with a loaded S&W M-19 .357 Magnum revolver, which controlled an electric eye that let you push open the door and go on through. If the button didn't get pushed you couldn't have opened that door with a Sherman tank, and if you raised objections when Carl ruled against you, he pushed another button and either Ray or Stanley came out and took care of you.

On one wall of the shop there was a gigantic reproduction of a painting of the Grand Canyon at sunset that Zeke loved with all his heart, and I thought was the homeliest thing I had ever seen in my life. On another wall was a trophy head of a water buffalo that he got on a commercial preserve somewhere and was the second homeliest thing I had ever seen in my life. Then over the cash register, along with the framed dollar bill, were some framed snapshots of Zeke in battle gear

and with his outfits in World War II and Korea.

"Is he here?" I asked.

Carl nodded. He almost never spoke. He glanced toward the back room and then flashed five fingers at me.

Fred gave me a look, so I knew it was something serious. I sat down to wait. The scissors clicked away, but there wasn't much conversation from either the barbers or the customers. Carl just sat on his stool and gazed out the window at the steps leading down from the street. He was getting thinner and more fragile-looking by the hour. He never wore a tie but always fastened the collar button of his shirts. His neck had gotten so scrawny that it looked like a chicken's neck sticking out of his collar. His pants didn't fit him any more either. He was dying of something, but the doctors didn't seem to know what. They wanted to say that it was simply old age and let it go at that.

Finally, after five minutes, Carl looked at me and nodded, and I went toward the door of the back room. When I pushed it open I saw Zeke and Stanley slumped in chairs and looking fantastically dejected, while across the room, facing toward the far wall, Ray sat with his head in his hands.

"A guy left town six weeks ago owing me forty-two hundred dollars from a bet on the Vikings," Zeke said. "On Friday I had definite information that he was in Cleveland. I sent Ray to collect. When he got there he found out the guy had just left for Cincinnati. He followed him there, located him, and then let him get away. I've just kissed the forty-two hundred dollars good-by. You always have just one chance on a thing like that, and you better make it stick."

Ray pushed back his chair and stood up. He waited, still hanging his head, to see if Zeke was going to say anything more to him. He was twenty-eight, tall and slender, and although he didn't look too strong, it was a known fact that he had tremendous, jolting, bruising power in those long arms and legs of his. At Maybock High he had been the meanest fullback in the history of the school. Then at Indiana, where he went on a scholarship, he also had the reputation of being the meanest player in the history of *that* school. After college he was drafted by the Bears in the thirty-second round. They liked him for his meanness, but he just wasn't big enough and he never got past the first squad cut. That made him real bitter, and when he joined the Army and they sent him to Germany he spent most of his time in the stockade for beating up people.

He wore his black hair "styled" in a sort of upsweep, and he had long

sideburns trimmed in a way that was supposed to make him look like a riverboat gambler. To enhance the image he always wore ruffled french evening shirts, that he got from me at a big discount but still paid plenty for.

When Zeke didn't say anything to him, he took off his coat and removed the shoulder rig with the .38 Special that he was carrying and stuffed the whole thing into a drawer. Then he shot a glance at Zeke, who was the only man in the world he was really afraid of or had any respect for.

"Beat it," Zeke said. "But don't go too far."

Ray moved gingerly toward the door, practically sliding along the wall to stay as far away as possible from Zeke. When he went out, Stanley, who was nothing but a dumb hood Zeke kept around to do his really dirty work, hesitated, and then slipped out too.

"Shit," Zeke said, dismissing the forty-two hundred dollars. Then he looked at me. "Lou was here a little while ago."

"So?"

"You've got him all shook up, Rex."

"What did he tell you?"

"He said you think maybe those guys are going to be waiting for us out there this weekend."

"Yeah," I said.

"I told him that if they are they'll be making the biggest mistake of their life."

"So what did he say?"

Zeke shrugged. "He got all excited."

He went to the door and opened it a crack and said, "Pop, send Al for coffee for me and Rex."

The phone rang and he talked for a minute and wrote some figures on a slip of paper.

"I was waiting for Ray at the time," he said to me after he hung up. "So I was in no mood, right? He can be such a pain in the ass, that Lou. He acted like he just couldn't believe that I'd go back there if I thought those guys were going to be there. 'You're fucking right I'm going,' I said. 'You think I'm afraid of those turds?' Sometimes I don't know about him. What did he think I was going to do? Let you go alone?"

The phone rang again. While Zeke was taking the call, one of his associates, Frank Delauney, came in, nodded to me, gave Zeke the Jesus sign, sat down, put his feet up on his desk, lit a cigar and began looking over the *Daily Racing Form*. When Zeke got off the phone I caught his

eye and glanced at Frank.

"Frank," he said. "Take a walk." Frank took a walk.

"You really think they'll try to bushwhack us, Rex?" Zeke said.

"It's just a little feeling I have," I said.

"Well, they're going to be making the biggest mistake of their life, that's all I've got to say. Shit, mood I'm in I'd go out there right now and take on the motherfuckers single-handed. Ran us right off our own goddam turf. Made us put our tail between our legs and run on home like my dog Spot. Have you said anything to Pete about this yet?"

"Not yet," I said, "Just you and Lou."

"Pete will go, don't worry," Zeke said. "Bob too."

"What about Lou?"

Zeke put his hand in his crotch and made a motion like he was jerking off.

"Who knows?" he said. "He's so fucked up anyway he doesn't know whether he's coming or going. If it isn't Dot it's Joanne. I wish he'd never in his life tell me one more thing about either one of those broads. First he started crying to me about Dot. She's really flipped her wig this time, he says. Then he has to tell me again how crazy he is about Joanne, how fantastic she is, how he couldn't possibly live without her. Who needs all that shit? Then he gets back on this other subject. 'Rex thinks they're going to try to get even with us.'"

"I didn't want to give him a nervous breakdown," I said. "But they may even try to wipe us out altogether."

Zeke looked at me.

"Yeah?"

"It could happen," I said.

He thought about that for a minute.

"Then he turns right around and says that he doesn't think they'll be there at all."

I shrugged.

"I'm telling you, it's just a feeling I have. But I was right about the other thing, wasn't I?"

"You sure were," he said.

"And he didn't believe me."

"Yeah."

The door opened and Al came in with the coffee. He was a scruffy kid who looked almost like an albino.

"He sits there all morning picking his nose," I said. "Then he goes for coffee."

“Keep your goddam finger out of your nose,” Zeke said. “How do you think that looks?”

“Yes, sir,” Al said.

“Do you want me to rap you?”

“No, sir,” Al said, putting the coffee down and hurrying out.

“I’m just trying to see that we’re ready for anything when we go back there,” I said. “Maybe he’s right. Maybe they’ll never want to come anywhere near the Sturrup River again. But what if he’s wrong and we walk right into an ambush?”

“Where do you think they’d try to catch us? On the road? At the lodge?”

“Anywhere,” I said.

“Shit, I’m not kidding you, the way I feel I’d take my AR18 out there right now and take them cocksuckers on single-handed. Open up on us for no fucking reason. We’re just standing there minding our own business. And then they make us bug out. The last time anybody made me bug out was in the big bugout in Korea, and I still haven’t forgotten that one either.”

The phone rang and he answered it. Then, just when he finished that call, the phone rang again.

I stood up and motioned to him, and he said, “Hold it,” and put his hand over the mouthpiece.

“I’m going to see Pete,” I said. “I’ll be in touch with you later.”

EIGHT

Pete sold trailers for a living, if you could call it that. He worked for Dick Solon, who owned a big flashy lot on Route 7, about a mile out of town—"DICK SOLON'S NEW & USED MOBILE HOMES." Solon was making a fortune out of it. All Pete was getting out of it was ulcers. There were too many salesmen on the lot. That was Solon's way. He believed in saturation. The result was that the salesmen were cutting each other's throats to get the business, and Pete simply wasn't as good at throat-cutting as the rest of them.

Pete was in the middle of trying to make a deal when I got there. It was another cold windy day, and I sat in my car for a while and watched him from a distance. The big bandage that Jim had put on him originally, that had been wrapped all the way around his head, was off and he was just wearing a white patch over the wound, and his thick black hair was blowing in his face. He had on a windbreaker that was being pushed flat against his chest and ballooned out behind his back by the wind. He looked like he was freezing to death, his hands stuck in his trouser pockets, rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet. He had solid white teeth and bright blue eyes and his face was always tanned dark because he spent so much time outdoors on the lot, but he had such deep creases around his mouth and diagonally across his cheeks and around his eyes and across his forehead that he looked a little bit like an ape. He was talking a blue streak to a couple of old coots, trying to appear casual and devil-may-care but at the same time applying the hard sell, obviously wanting real bad to get them to put the downstroke on a trailer, and the coots were just watching him with their white hair, their Social Security, their pension, their Medicare, their puffy faces and their false teeth and were obviously resisting the hell out of him. Inside, in the nice warm office, I could see Solon bullshitting with some of the other salesmen.

The brand-new trailers were lined up in a long row along the front of the lot, looking immaculate and impressive. Behind them was a row of

less impressive used trailers. Above it all, little red, yellow, blue and green pennants strung out on wires that crisscrossed the lot were fluttering in the wind with a sound like thousands of birds' wings beating.

I got out of my car and stood leaning against the front fender, and almost immediately Pete turned around and saw me. He waved and I waved back and he said something to the coots and came over to me.

"Lou was here," he said. He had to speak loud to be heard over the roar of the trucks going past on the highway and the fluttering of the pennants. "He told me you think those guys are going to be laying for us this weekend."

"That's right," I said.

"I told him the pricks better not be anywhere within a hundred miles of there if they know what's good for them."

"That's how I feel too," I said.

"He said maybe we ought to stay away from there this weekend. Shit."

"I want to talk to you," I said.

"I'll be with you in a minute," he said. "I'm trying to get these assholes to make a move, but it's like the Chinese water torture."

He had bad luck. It just followed him around, there was no other way to explain it. In our class at Maybock High he was voted Mr. Personality, but a fat lot of good it ever did him. It took him a hell of a long time to get over the wound he got on D-Day. When he finally did get back to Maybock he took a job as night manager of a roadhouse called the Red Lion, and married an old girl friend of his called Nancy Bell. About a year later the police raided the Red Lion and found girls and drugs going on upstairs. They closed the place up and it never opened again, and that's when Nancy had her first miscarriage. And it just kept going on like that from then on. He would get a job and something would go wrong and Nancy would have another miscarriage. And no two people on earth wanted children more than they did. Finally, I hired him and put him in the sporting-goods department at the store. He knew all about guns, of course, and I thought he would do okay there. The next thing I knew he got into an argument with Jerry Simpson, the head of the department and one of my best people, over some stupid little technicality that didn't make any real difference to anybody anyway, lost his temper, called Jerry a son of a bitch, and quit. After that he just sort of gave up for a year or so and didn't do anything. Nancy got a job at the telephone company, and that kept them alive. When he did go

back to work again it was always at oddball jobs that never led anywhere and never lasted very long. His famous personality was wearing thin. Most of the time all you got from him was a feeling of desperation. I was pretty sure they didn't even talk about children any more. The only time he ever seemed really happy was when he was out in the woods hunting with us or when he was talking about his guns. Of course he had never had much money to put into guns, but he did have a good small collection of German pistols, including a Walther PPK that was supposed to have belonged to Rommel.

"Shawnnette!"

Solon had spotted me through the office window and was hurrying toward me.

"Shawnnette!"

He always pronounced it "Shawnnette," whereas most people just said "Ginnette." I imagined that he thought I would like it because it sounded more cultured. He had a terrific head of wavy silver hair, huge muttonchop sideburns, almost no forehead and practically no neck. He considered us fellow tycoons and always told me how much he valued my advice on merchandising.

He shook my hand with both of his big warm hands and began asking my advice about a sign that he was thinking of having made. I didn't want to hear about it. All I wanted to do was talk to Pete and get out of there.

"This Ronnie," he said. "Do you know him? The one-legged kid? The sign guy? Ronnie Princer?"

"I don't know him," I said.

"Well, you know the new sign on the Elks Hall? The big BPOE sign you see when you go up Allison toward Liberty? With all the tinkle-tinkle and the twinkle-twinkle? You know what I mean? You've seen it, haven't you?"

"Yeah, I've seen it."

"Do you think it's eye-catching? Just tell me that."

"I guess so."

"Well, this Ronnie I'm telling you about, he made that sign. It's the latest thing. He does it with round pieces of polished metal, sort of like large sequins, and he attaches them to the board in such a way that they move freely in the wind and catch the light from the sun during the day and from a floodlight at night, and that's how you get the effect. It costs a fortune, though. The whole thing is done by hand. It's sort of like stringing beads. You have to have the patience of a saint. He wants to

charge me six hundred dollars for a sign roughly half the size of the Elks sign but with two sides. What do you think? Is it going to be worth that kind of money in terms of catching the eyes of people driving past and making them actually stop and come in and see about buying a mobile home from me rather than from the guy down the road? These are the things I'm trying to decide right now. Say, where is he anyway? He was supposed to wait here until I made up my mind. And he has some samples with him that I'd like you to see too."

Solon looked around. A flock of salesmen had followed him out of the office and were standing behind him blowing on their hands and trying to look sincere and businesslike and eager, as if they were ready to wheel and deal at a second's notice.

"Where's Ronnie!" Solon yelled. "Ronnie Princer! The sign guy! Where is he!"

The salesmen milled around, looking at each other blankly and working their mouths and trying to appear co-operative, but none of them knew.

"Hey, Pete!" Solon yelled.

Pete was still with his customers.

"Ronnie Princer!" Solon yelled. "The one-legged kid! Where is he!"

"He's over having coffee at the Trio!" Pete yelled back, meaning the diner across the highway.

"Get him!" Solon yelled. "Tell him I want him!"

Pete made a pained face, then hitched up his shoulders and stood with his hands down at his sides spread out palms frontwards and his mouth wide open, hoping that Solon would see the situation and send someone else.

"Go on!" Solon yelled. "I haven't got all day!"

Pete got away from his customers and started dodging across the road through the heavy traffic toward the diner.

"This boy was a demolitions expert in Vietnam," Solon said. "His specialty was going into a house or what-have-you where the Viet Cong had been and checking it out to see if it was booby-trapped. Then one day he was going through a minefield and he stepped on one and got his leg all messed up. They took it off above the knee. He wears a mechanical contraption that the government gave him that he's supposed to be able to walk with without crutches, just a cane, but it doesn't look so hot to me. I think he ought to go ahead and use crutches, but he's very proud. He won't even let you help him or anything. There he is. Watch him. See what you think."

I saw Pete come out of the diner and hold the door open for Ronnie, who came out leaning on a cane. Through the trucks going past I could see Pete start to try to help him down the steps, but Ronnie waved him away. Pete hesitated for a minute and then dodged back across the highway. He looked around quickly for the two old coots, but discovered that while he had been gone another salesman had moved in on them and taken them off to the far end of the lot.

In the meantime, Solon stuck two fingers between his teeth and whistled at Ronnie.

"They gave him a Purple Heart," he said. "That's all he got out of it. Can you beat that?"

Ronnie had reached the curb. Hearing the whistle, he looked over at Solon and waved. Then he started across the road. His way of walking, or rather of propelling himself, was breath-taking. It made your heart stop every time he went into the motion. It began with him doing a split, suddenly shooting his good leg forward and swooping his body along with it, sort of like you do in bowling and in some of the old-time dance steps. But there was nothing graceful about it. It was more of a lunge or a lurch than anything else. When he reached the end of that part of the motion and was balanced there with his feet a mile apart and his crotch almost touching the ground, then he planted his cane firmly with his left hand, grabbed hold of the thigh of his good leg with his right and somehow or other managed to pull himself back up into a standing position, having gained less than a yard on the whole deal.

The trouble was that the trucks and the cars didn't want to wait around for him while he made it all the way across the road, so there was a lot of horn blowing and shrieking of brakes, and the big trucks started revving their engines at him, which was deafening. When he got to the middle of the highway something happened. He couldn't straighten up. He was stranded out there, frozen in his split, with all the horns blowing and the diesel engines revving.

I started to run toward him, and Solon grabbed my arm.

"Leave him alone," he said. "He just gets mad if anybody tries to help him."

"You asshole," I said.

I went out onto the highway, holding up my hands to stop traffic both ways. The honking got worse, but I didn't pay any attention.

Up close, I saw that Ronnie was a very handsome young man, almost girlish. His eyes were rolling in his head and he had his lips pressed together and was breathing so hard through his nose that the tip was

bent down and his nostrils were sucked in flat on the intake. His face was shiny with sweat and his coloring had gone beyond being flushed and looked blue.

I bent down to him.

"It's locked," he said, hissing it.

I put my hands under his arms and lifted him. He was small and surprisingly light. It was no problem at all to pick him up bodily and carry him the rest of the way across the road.

"Thanks," he said, when I put him down. He wiped the sweat out of his eyes with the back of his hand. Then he straightened himself up and tested his leg. "I think it's all right now. It happens like that once in a while. It just locks for some reason, and then there's not a damn thing you can do about it."

"You okay?" Solon said, coming over.

He didn't look at me.

"Yeah, I'm okay," Ronnie said.

"Well, get those samples for me. I want to show them to my wife and see what she thinks."

"Tell him to drop dead," I said.

"Drop dead, Mother," Ronnie said.

He turned and swooped and dragged himself to his panel truck and climbed in and took off.

Solon spit at my feet.

"Get off my lot," he growled. Then he jerked his thumb toward Pete. "And take your friend along with you."

He spun around and marched back to his office, his head down like a bull and swinging his arms and shoulders as if he was fighting his way through a crowd.

Pete came over to me. "Give me a ride home, will you?" he said.

NINE

I went in and had a beer with Pete at his house, although it was a firm rule of mine never to drink anything before lunch. I felt bad because I had lost him his job, but he said not to worry about it, he couldn't have taken Solon much longer anyway. He drank his beer straight down. When he went to the kitchen and came back with a bottle of Bourbon, I said I had to go.

"Wait," he said. "What about this weekend?"

"I think we should have a meeting and talk about it," I said.

"Yeah, that sounds like a good idea. But you know you can count on me, Rex."

"Yeah, I know," I said.

"Whatever the deal is, don't worry," he said. "I'm with you. In fact, I feel like I have a personal score to settle with those pricks for giving me this hole in my head."

"Okay, kid," I said.

"Pricks won't think it's so goddam funny if I catch them loitering around out there and stick about fifteen pounds of hot lead up their ass."

He came to the door with me, and the reality of all of his rotten luck and his shitty little wasted life hit me full force when he stood close to me in the doorway. He wafted it out of him like bad breath. I just wanted to get away from there before Nancy came home.

"I'll get in touch with everybody and set up a meeting," I said.

"Okay."

"So I'll probably call you tonight or tomorrow morning."

"Okay."

I went down the steps and started to go to my car. He had about twelve square feet of front lawn, and it wasn't even lawn really, just brown weeds full of trash. Nobody had any flowers or trees on that street, and it looked like nobody ever cut their grass or even made an attempt to clean up the trash.

I went back to him.

"Do you need any money?" I said.

"Oh, no, no, no, no, no."

"Listen," I said, "I'm asking if you need any money."

He got all embarrassed.

"I don't know," he said. "I'd have to ask Nancy. I don't know exactly how we stand. Maybe."

"I'm going to put a thousand in your account as soon as I get back downtown."

"Oh, no, Rex," he protested. "Jesus, listen—"

"Shut up," I said.

"Listen, Rex—"

I grabbed his right hand. I had very powerful hands, and when I squeezed he turned white and threw his head back with his mouth wide open and the veins popping out on his forehead and his neck.

When I let him go he stood there looking down at his hand, which was shaking like a leaf.

"You're going to break somebody's hand that way one of these days," he said.

"Yeah, when I say shut up I mean shut up," I said.

He nodded, holding his hand up close to his chest with his other hand, like he was nursing it.

I went straight to the Bank of Maybock and made the deposit when I got back to town. By the time I returned to the store, most of the morning was gone. My secretary gave me a message that Lou had called, but when I returned the call his secretary said that he was out and wouldn't be back until around three o'clock.

Jim joined Bob and me for lunch at the Arms. It turned out that Lou had called both of them.

"I think he's afraid he might get hurt," Jim said.

"And that's what pisses me off," I said. "The idea that I would let us walk right into an ambush."

"He really is the worst goddam Jonah I've ever known in my life," Bob said.

They both agreed that we should have a meeting right away, and I said that I would set it up.

When I got back to the store I found Paula waiting for me in my outer office. I was surprised because I had had no idea that she was coming, and I could tell right away that she hadn't come to talk about the job this time. She had something else on her mind and she was feeling

reckless. For the first time she looked straight back into my eyes when I looked at her. Usually there had been a lot of glancing away, fiddling with rings and strands of hair, etc. She had wanted to make a nice impression. Now she just sat in her chair with her legs crossed and gazed at me.

"You're looking good," I said.

"Thank you."

"Do you want a drink?"

"All right."

There was a refrigerator in the bathroom. I made a good stiff scotch on the rocks for her and Bourbon on the rocks for myself.

"You seem different today," she said.

"So do you," I said.

She was wearing a loose sweater that was supposed to disguise the fact that she had come braless, but it didn't. She knew it didn't. She knew I knew it didn't. How could you fail to notice that those melons of hers were loose in there?

"I didn't come to talk about the job," she said.

"I know," I said.

"I just wanted to see you."

"Okay," I said.

"How does that sound?"

"It sounds as if you're looking for trouble."

She gave me a smile.

"You're right, I am."

It made my skin crawl.

The phone rang. My secretary said that there was a call from a man in Chicago who had been trying to reach me for two days. I told her to give me ten minutes.

"Ten minutes?" Paula said.

"Bob is an old friend of mine," I said.

"I know that," she said, "but I like you."

"You don't know me very well."

"I know, but I like you. And you like me."

I couldn't get used to her.

"Yeah, I like you," I said.

"I've always liked you," she said.

I guess it's different with everybody, but with me when a woman really excited me it affected me all over. It wasn't just that The General got angry. My scalp moved, I felt a tightening in my gut, a warm glow

came over my groin, the hair on my legs got rigid. I even felt it in my wrists. Maybe even my toenails reacted, who knows?

"Always," she said.

She seemed to be having a marvelous time—sipping her drink, smoking a cigarette, smiling, gazing at me, giving me her boobs and her legs. She had nice legs too. She was tall, maybe a little horsey with big bones and strong-looking, but I didn't mind that. I'm big too. Wide mouth, pronounced cheekbones. Clear blue eyes. Good teeth. A healthy, well-built, handsome young woman.

"The very first time I met you I liked you," she said. "I thought to myself, 'There's a real man.'"

It wasn't crude. In fact, it was very soft and yielding and warm, and terrifically provocative. And on top of that I got the feeling that she had no intention of trying to put me in any corners, that she was willing to go 99 per cent of the way, and if I wanted to come the rest of the way, fine. If not, she'd do that too.

"In fact, I never really cared much about the job," she said. "You knew that, didn't you? Oh, I wanted it, but basically it was just a way to be able to come here and see you."

"Listen, Paula," I said. "I like you and I think you're sexy as hell, but we're going to have this drink and then we're going to break this thing up, and we're both just going to forget that it ever happened, okay?"

"I want you, Rex," she said, still calm.

"You heard me," I said.

"You could have it any way you wanted it," she said. "I'd meet you anywhere, do anything you wanted me to do."

"You don't listen," I said.

"I listen," she said, "but I want you. Anyway, I'm leaving Bob."

"What?"

She nodded.

"Does he know?"

"He knows," she said. "I haven't told him yet, but he knows."

"When?"

"I don't know exactly. Pretty soon, I guess. Well, I haven't been happy."

"He's wild about you."

"But I'm not wild about him," she said. "I never was, but I thought I liked him at least."

She stood up and finished her drink. Then she moved toward me. I was sitting on the couch and she sat down close to me and took my

hand. Her hand was wet from holding the glass.

"Rex, I don't want to defend myself to you," she said, "or run him down either. I don't hate him. It's not that. I wish I did. That would make it all so much easier. I just don't want to be married to him and live with him any longer. And I don't have to. When you're unhappy you have a right to leave. I'm still young. I can start a new life."

She slid down off the couch and knelt in front of me and kissed the palm of my hand, looking up at me from the corner of her eye.

"You do like me, don't you?" she said.

The phone rang, but I just let it ring. It stopped after six rings.

"Meet me tonight," she whispered.

"I'll think about it," I said.

"No, don't think, Rex," she said. "Just do it. Just call me. You won't be sorry. When I'm in love with someone I'm very good to them."

I put my hand on the top of her head and pushed her face right down on The General. She was off balance and it was an awkward position for her, but I held her that way for a minute, with her face twisted around sideways and her cheek resting on ten inches of cock that was so hard it must have felt like ten inches of pig iron to her. Then I grabbed her under her arms and pulled her up on top of me and we swapped some wild spits and she felt me all over, writhing and groaning, and I finally felt those beautiful tits of hers and that beautiful ass, and then I decided that it had gone far enough for the moment.

"I'll think about it," I said.

"What?"

She pulled away from me slightly, looking at me as if I had slapped her.

"I said I'll think about it," I said.

She sat up straight, and then suddenly her eyes narrowed and she gave me a look I didn't like. Her hair was a mess and her makeup was smeared and her skirt was up around her ass. She stood up and pulled her skirt down.

"Let's just forget about it," she said.

She went into the bathroom and fixed her mouth. Then she came out and drank the ice water in the bottom of her glass.

"Stay a minute longer," I said.

"No," she said, not looking at me.

She started toward the door. I tried to take her hand but she pulled it away from me.

"Wait, Paula," I said.

“What’s the point?” she said, and went out.

TEN

Paula's visit upset me emotionally and also gave me an ache in my balls. As a result, I was as mean as a rattlesnake the rest of the afternoon.

I finally reached Lou at his office at four-thirty. I didn't even give him a chance to start mealy-mouthing me. I launched right into him, asking him what the hell he thought he was doing going around to everybody ahead of me.

"I've got a right to talk to people, don't I?" he said.

"You've got a right to keep your goddam mouth shut," I said. "When I want to tell somebody something, I want to tell them myself, not have somebody going around ahead of me doing it for me."

"Oh, take it easy, Rex," he said.

"Take it easy my ass," I said. "Listen, I just want to know one thing from you. Are you going with us this weekend or aren't you? Everybody else is going."

"Everybody?"

"Yeah, everybody. We're having a meeting tomorrow. I'm going to set it up. If you're coming with us I want you at that meeting. If not, I want you to keep your goddam nose out of this whole thing from now on and keep your trap shut about it too."

"Rex?"

"Yeah?"

He lowered his voice way down.

"I'm not going with you," he said.

That was about all I needed.

"You goddam worm," I said.

"You can call me anything you want to," he said, "but I'm not going. And I don't think you ought to go either."

"When I want advice from a goddam worm I'll ask for it," I said, "Hear me? And here's something else. Just stay out of my way from now on, you lily-livered little piece of shit."

He hung up.

That was when I decided to go and see Mary Probst. I had two drinks in my office. By the time I went downstairs the store had emptied of customers and the employees were hurrying out the side door, under the eyes of the guards and their dogs.

I went to a bar down the street and had another drink and called Mary from there.

"How was your trip?" I said.

I felt a little mellower by then and I tried to sound nice, as if I really gave a shit.

"Pretty good," she said.

"How was your mother?"

As if I gave a shit.

"Pretty good."

All of a sudden through my mellowness it hit me that she wasn't sounding the way I wanted a broad to sound who it was costing me a lot of money to keep in that apartment in Newberry.

"What's the matter?" I said.

"Huh?"

I loved that.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes."

It wasn't that she sounded snotty or sullen or anything like that. It was just that she wasn't sounding the least bit sultry or romantic or alluring, which of course was what I wanted. And of course what I was entitled to.

"I'm going to come and see you in about an hour, honey," I said. "How's that?"

"Okay."

"Just okay?"

Silence.

"Why don't you make yourself a gimlet or something in the meantime?"

"Okay."

I felt like getting mad, but I resisted it. What would that prove? The only thing to do was to go there and hope that whatever it was that was wrong with her she would have gotten out of her system by then.

I had one more drink and then drove over to Newberry. Her apartment was in a good neighborhood. She had spent a long time and had gone to a lot of trouble finding it, and I hadn't objected to that. In fact, I had approved of it, even though it had wound up costing me

fairly big money, because I had been ready for a change. The girl I had had before this one, Elizabeth Sterchi, had been mildly a slob, and the one before that, Donna Keyes, had been really one. This time I had wanted somebody sort of clean-cut, and Mary had seemed to fill the bill. I kept an eye on her for a couple of months, and Helen Newhouse, my office manager, kept an eye on her too. Helen was good that way. She knew me inside and out, and I could trust her. I even banged her once in a while. She was the kind of woman you could take to a motel on a Saturday night and put a bottle on the table and just have a goddam good time with, no strings attached, no bars held, no goddam worrying about impressing somebody, no promises, no regrets, no tears, no tomorrows. Just good solid drinking and banging and goosing and dirty stories and plenty of laughs.

She got me the other two, too, and the one before that, and the one before that. She knew how to put it across to those kids that the big boss might be interested in them and that if they wanted to get out of accounting or credit or notions or housewares or wherever they happened to be at the time and join the leisured class they had better be sweet to him if he happened to invite them out for a drink one of these days after work.

"This one's sort of different," Helen said, describing Mary. "She's an old-fashioned girl."

"You mean she puts it in for you?"

Helen howled.

"What are you laughing for?" I said. "You told me that one yourself."

"Oh, I always laugh, Rexie, you know that. But you know what I mean, with those dimples and those big brown eyes and the cute manners and the well-scrubbed look and the neatness. But what's nice about it, I think, is that she's got a little of the high school prick teaser in her too, with the tight sweaters and the short skirts, always showing off those adorable little bubbies and that adorable little bottom, and always flirting all over the place with all the men in the department, but in a real cute wholesome way."

"Okay, I'm interested," I said.

"Nothing like Liz," she assured me. "Nothing like Donna."

I remembered her descriptions of them. Liz: "Hotter than a two-dollar pistol but lazier than a cat." Donna: "A sexy kid, but you have to wonder if she bathes all that often."

"Do you think she'll want to play house?" I asked.

"Well, if she doesn't, there's always me."

She howled again.

"Listen, Rexie, the girl is twenty-six going on twenty-seven. She's had one divorce and one annulment so far. She's going nowhere. She's afraid to get married again because of what happened the last two times, and none of the men she knows around here appeal to her anyway. She shares an apartment with two other girls, eats spaghetti, watches TV, and spends all her money on clothes because new clothes cheer her up. As a result, she's always hitting petty cash for two dollars and five dollars and coming to me for fifty dollars in advance so she can pay the rent. She's ready for something, believe me."

So I kept an eye on her for a while, and I liked what I saw, and one day I called her on her extension down in accounting and asked her if she'd like to meet me at the Blue Moon for a drink after work. She said she'd love to, but she was so nervous she had to keep clearing her throat.

I got her drunk. It wasn't difficult. She would have jumped over the moon if I'd told her to, and she didn't have much of a capacity for booze anyway. It wasn't a very nice thing to do, but it was the best way and the easiest way and the fastest way to get where you were going. Then I took her to the motel where I always took them, where I was known and where there were never any problems.

When I banged her it was like a sack of flour. But what can you expect when somebody is bombed out of their mind? That wasn't the point anyway. The point was just to get the preliminaries out of the way.

On our next date I didn't get her drunk and she was a lot better. She was no Donna Keyes of course, but there never had been anybody like her for having a dirty mind. She was so imaginative and so kinky that you never knew what was going to happen next or what direction it would be coming from. She even went in for costumes, which was something I had never had any experience with before but which I really got to like very much. She got dressed up as a little cowgirl once, and it was the best piece of ass I ever had in my life.

Mary just did the routine stuff, but she was okay at it. At any rate, she was very fastidious in her personal habits and wasn't on drugs of any kind, and that was a relief after the other two. So on our third date I told Mary what I had in mind and she said okay, in so many words. So she quit her job in accounting and started riding around all over the place in her little red Japanese car looking for a classy apartment. Then, after she found it and got that end of it all squared away, she started riding around looking for furniture to go in it. Needless to say, I didn't

normally go in for any of this. Normally, we would just go ahead and use the place where the girl was already living, if she didn't have any roommates and there weren't any special problems about my being seen coming and going at all hours, or if she had roommates or there was likely to be problems we would just take a furnished apartment somewhere and let it go at that. But this one was an entirely different matter. Not only the classy apartment and brand-new furniture, but the furniture had to be "decorator" stuff, which meant that the stuff I carried at Jeannette's wasn't nearly good enough. But I went along with it. I kept making healthy deposits in the account I had opened for her in the bank at Newberry, and she kept spending my money like it was going out of style. Okay, but at the same time she was being very nice to me. When I would call her up and say that I wanted to see her, she would always make it sound like she could hardly wait until I got there, and when I got there she always made it seem like she could hardly wait to get me in bed and start showing me a good time, but of course, as Helen would have said, in a real cute wholesome way.

So everything had gone along smoothly until now.

Now I stopped in front of her apartment house, right in back of her little red Japanese car. It was a white two-story building with a lawn, some big shade trees and rosebushes along the sidewalk. You went through a white-painted wrought-iron gate into a courtyard. There was a fountain in the courtyard. The water in the fountain was green. A Dixie cup on its side was sailing across the green water in the wind. The wind was cold. It had turned cold right after the sun had gone down. I could see the lights in the apartments all around me and hear the TV sets playing faintly.

Mary lived on the second floor.

Instead of giving me a big kiss the way she usually did when she let me in and then pulling me along behind her to show me the latest wall she'd painted or the pictures she'd just hung or the curtains she'd put up, she just said, "Hi," and led me into the living room.

There, she threw herself down on the curved sofa that had cost me $699 and lit a cigarette and kept her eyes away from me.

"Listen, I want to know what's wrong with you," I said.

"There's nothing wrong with me."

"You sure, honey?"

Trying to sound sweet.

"No, I'm not sure."

"You want to tell me what it is?"

She shrugged, puffing away on her cigarette.

"I want you to tell me what it is."

She just shrugged again, and kept her eyes away from me.

I was trying to think if this was her time of the month, but I had always had trouble keeping track of it, with all of them. I had a calendar in the top drawer of my desk at the office that I marked with a star each time, or that I should have marked each time. But I would go along very efficiently for a couple of months and then I would slip up, and after that I never could get it straight again.

"Do you feel all right?"

"I guess so."

"Listen, are you sick?"

"I'm not necessarily sick," she said. "But I'm not necessarily feeling too good either."

She had on some old slacks and an old sweater and bedroom slippers. Her hair was a mess and she didn't have any makeup on, which made her eyes look unfamiliar. The living room looked like a cyclone had hit it.

"Well," I said, "the way you feel, is it a mental thing or a physical thing?"

"Huh?"

"You say you're not feeling too good. Do you mean mentally or physically?"

"A little of both, I think."

"Have you seen a doctor?"

She sort of laughed.

"Have you?"

"No."

I felt the blood rush to my head.

"Hey, you're not pregnant or anything like that, are you?"

"No."

"Is that the truth, now?"

She sort of laughed again.

"That's the truth."

"Well, why didn't you tell me you weren't feeling up to par when I called you?"

"Up to par?" she said. "Is that what you said?"

"Yes."

"Wow."

"Hey," I said, "you know I don't like that expression."

She waved her cigarette in the air.

"Oh, wow," she said.

I decided to ignore it.

"Did you have a drink?" I said.

"A while ago."

"Do you want another one?"

"Okay."

I started to get up and then sat back down.

I sat there staring at her for a minute, not knowing what to make of her, with her cigarette waving and her goddam indifference, or whatever it was. The trouble was that I knew something was very wrong but I didn't really want to find out what it was because I really didn't want to know what it was. She glanced at me with a little twitch at the corner of her mouth. At first I thought it was going to be a smile and I got my hopes up, but then I realized that she was just doing something with her tongue inside her mouth.

"I thought you were going to make me a drink," she said.

My mouth had suddenly begun to feel numb and my lips fat, and I was afraid that if I tried to say anything I would sputter. So I went to the kitchen, which also looked like a cyclone had hit it. I made her a gimlet to end all gimlets, and myself a double martini. Usually she put out a lot of macadamia nuts and cheese dip and shit like that, but I couldn't find any of it in all the confusion, so I just put the drinks on a tray and carried them to the living room.

"Thanks a lot," she said, taking her drink. "How did you like the kitchen?"

"It looks like a cyclone hit it," I said.

"A what?"

"A cyclone."

"That's what I thought you said."

"In here too."

"You ought to see the bedroom," she said.

"You didn't go to visit your mother, did you?"

"No."

"Why did you tell me that?"

"Because I didn't want you coming around here. Mark's been paying me a little call."

"Who?"

"My husband, I mean my ex-husband. He just got out of jail. He went to my mother's house and threatened to kill her if she didn't tell him

where I was living. So she told him, and he came here, and he made me tell him about this."

She made a gesture with her glass that included me and the whole apartment, and she also let me see her right cheek for the first time. There was a small black spot with a red circle around it over the cheekbone. She let me have a good look at it.

"He did that with a cigarette," she said. "That's how he made me tell. He isn't very nice. He has a slight habit, of course. About a hundred dollars a day. That's what he went to jail for. For armed robbery to buy his shit with. They took him off it when he was in jail, but he got right back on it the minute he got out. He has a gun and everything. I don't know what he's going to do next."

"Where is he now?" I said.

"I don't know. He's gone."

"Is he coming back?"

"No. What would he want to come back for? There's nothing left. I'm not kidding, you ought to go in there and take a look at the bedroom."

"I don't want to look at it," I said. "You tell me about it."

"He took the TV. He took all my little bit of jewelry that I had. He took everything I had that he could possibly sell, and what he didn't take he tore up. He took the stereo too."

She pointed across the room with her thumb.

I didn't even bother to look around at the place where the stereo had been. I had suddenly figured something out. Ever since I had stepped into the apartment there had been something about Mary's manner, her attitude, her way of speaking, the way she reclined on the sofa that had reminded me of something else, and finally I knew what it was. It reminded me of the last real conversation I had had with Michael, which had taken place in my den during the Easter holidays of his junior year at Wisconsin, in other words shortly before he got kicked out. This conversation reminded me so much of that one that it was weird, but somehow or other I kept having these flashes when I really thought it was Michael there on the sofa instead of Mary. He had sprawled in front of me and waved a cigarette around too, while he had told me in a very off-handed and matter-of-fact and also thoroughly infuriating way exactly what he thought of me, and he had really seemed quite amused by it all, just as she seemed, I thought, in spite of everything, to be getting a kick out of telling me this God-awful story.

"But that isn't the worst part," she said. "The worst part is about the money. See, Mark found my checkbook and he saw how much money I

had in my checking account, and then he found my passbook for my savings account and saw how much I had in that, and he made me go down to the bank with him and draw out every dime of it and hand it over to him. Because he said that if I didn't he was going to tell my mother what I was really doing here in Newberry, which she thinks is working as a confidential secretary to a very rich man who has all kinds of mysterious business operations going on all over the United States, which is what I told her. I would have died if he'd done that. I'm not kidding. I would have taken a whole bottle of sleeping pills. I had it all planned."

She finished her drink and lit another cigarette. Then she delicately touched her burn with her fingertips.

"But that isn't the really worst part," she said. "The really worst part is about the fib I told you about the furniture and the TV and the stereo and everything. Remember I told you I paid cash for everything? Well, I didn't. I just put deposits down on it all and put most of the money you gave me into my savings account. I did that because I just thought that you never can tell what's going to happen when you get involved in a thing like this thing I was involved in with you and it's better to have some ready cash available where you can get at it in a hurry if you have to. So what if it costs you a few dollars in interest per month if you pay on the installment plan? At least you've got your little nest egg down there in the bank if you ever need it, right? But I guess I wasn't so smart after all, was I? Now Mark's got it all. Two thousand seven hundred and twelve dollars and thirty-three cents, plus all the stuff he took and my Gulf card. And here I am without a penny to my name."

I got up and started to go toward her, and I saw the fear come into her eyes.

"Wait a minute," she said, sliding away from me along the sofa. "If you come one inch closer to me I'll start screaming for the police, and if you don't think I can scream when I want to you just try me and see."

Her voice was amazingly level.

I stopped and stood gazing at her, probably swaying a little, anyway feeling numb all over now, almost paralyzed.

"I mean it," she said.

Then I remembered something.

"Okay," I said, moving back from her again. The only thing I seemed to feel was my hatred for her.

"Listen," I said. "I'm just going to get myself a glass of ice water and then I'll go."

Before she could say anything I turned and went into the kitchen. I opened the refrigerator and took out the bottle of ice water and filled a glass. Standing there with the glass in my left hand I glanced back into the living room and saw that she was still sprawled on the couch. She was looking at me suspiciously, but she couldn't see that with my right hand I was reaching up on top of the cabinet over the sink for the Colt .38 that I had stashed up there in the beginning. It had always been a policy of mine to keep some heat around when I was involved in one of these arrangements, just in case of an emergency, like jealous boy friends or a shakedown. I turned back to the sink and tossed the remaining water in my glass down the drain. Then I put the glass down, took the revolver out of its holster and turned back toward her with the gun in my hand, letting her get a good look at it.

Her eyes and her mouth popped open simultaneously and she glanced quickly from side to side, saw that she couldn't escape, and then pushed herself back against the cushions behind her, with her jaw pulled down and back, the cords in her throat standing out and all her teeth and her tongue showing.

"Don't breathe," I said.

I thumbed the revolver back to full cock, and there were three crisp clicks as the sear dropped into the hammer notches.

"One little squeak out of you and I'll blow your head off," I said. "Do you believe me?"

She didn't even blink.

"Believe me?"

She just kept staring up the barrel of the gun and at my finger on the trigger.

"Answer me."

She started to say something and then remembered that she wasn't supposed to make a sound and she nodded her head in a couple of quick little jerks.

"Well, that's good," I said, "because the mood I'm in right now, the way I'm feeling, I'd kill you without even batting an eyelash."

She had a sudden attack of something like hiccups and put her hand up to her mouth while her whole body spasmed for about a minute and a half. Then her face looked pasty white and shiny with sweat.

I sat down in the armchair where I had been sitting before, and I was sweating too and my gun hand was even trembling a little. I put the butt of the gun down in my lap, right on my crotch, still aimed right at her head.

“Come over here,” I said.

She wouldn’t move, just kept staring at the gun, and I was afraid she was going to go into the hiccups again.

“Listen, come over here,” I said.

I guess there was something in my voice that scared the shit out of her, because she nodded and started coming toward me, moving like she was in the dark, edging along, feeling her way, reaching out with her hands, and never taking her eyes off that gun. I told her to kneel down in front of me, and she knelt down just like Paula had done. I spread my legs apart and told her to come closer, and when her face was close enough I grabbed hold of her hair with my free hand and held a bunch of it up close to the side of her head so that she couldn’t move. Her hair was damp. Her body felt hot against the inside of my legs. She was quivering all over, and she was breathing hard through her nose. I stuck the barrel up to her lips and touched them with it.

“Suck,” I said.

For the first time her eyes looked up at mine, and I thought she didn’t know what I wanted her to do and was trying to see it in my eyes. But she knew, because she opened her mouth and started sucking on the .38.

“Do it like you mean it, you little bitch,” I said. “Come on, suck that goddam thing. Let’s see some slobber down there. Let’s hear those lips smack. Use that tongue a little. Purr, damn it. Lap it up.”

She sucked on it like it was the real thing, with her eyes closed, sometimes her teeth hitting on the front sight but not letting that bother her, smacking and tonguing and covering the whole barrel with her slobber, etc., and then I gave her The General, and when I came I made her swallow every drop of it because she had always been a little reluctant about that.

When it was all over I wrote her a check for five hundred dollars and told her never to come anywhere near me again or try to get in touch with me or tell anybody anything about this, because if she did I would send somebody around to break her nose.

Then I drove to a bar and ordered a drink and got some dimes from the bartender and called Pete and Zeke and Bob and Jim and told them that the meeting would be at nine o’clock in the morning in my office, and they all said they would be there.

ELEVEN

The next morning, Thursday, I went to my office early and gave instructions to my secretary to show the others in as soon as they arrived. I also told her that once they were all present I didn't want us to be disturbed by anything or anybody.

Bob came first, then Pete—and then Zeke and Lou together. The minute Zeke came in and looked at me he knew that something was very wrong and he came shambling over to me.

"What's the matter, Rex?" he said.

"He's not in this," I said.

"He's not?"

Zeke glanced back over his shoulder at Lou, who stood just inside the door, hanging his head.

"How was I supposed to know?" Zeke said, almost whispering. "You didn't tell me about it."

"I told *him*," I said.

Zeke came closer to me.

"Well, what could I do? He called me last night, said he heard there was going to be a meeting. I thought maybe you hadn't been able to reach him. I told him I'd pick him up this morning."

"Okay," I said.

"Why didn't you tell me something?"

"I said it's okay," I said.

I looked straight at Lou.

"What are you doing here?" I asked him.

The others all looked at me and then at Lou and then at each other.

"I want an answer," I said.

Then Jim came in, and of course he didn't understand what was going on either.

Lou cleared his throat.

"I want to go with you, Rex," he said.

"What's that?" I said.

“I want to go along,” he said, sounding like a bullfrog.

“You want to go with us?”

“Yes.”

“Why?” I said. “Why do you say that? When I talked to you yesterday you said you didn’t want to go.” I knew that the others were uncomfortable, but I also knew that they realized it was something strictly between Lou and me and that they had better keep out of it. “Well?” I said. He shook his head and hunched his shoulders and shuffled his feet and made several other ineffectual gestures.

“I—”

“What?”

“I changed my mind.”

“What?” I said. “I can’t hear you.”

“I changed my mind.”

“Is that so?” I said. “You changed your mind?”

“Yes.”

“And now you want to come along with us?”

“Yes.”

“Well, what made you change your mind, Lou? If you don’t mind my asking.”

“I don’t know.”

“Would you mind speaking up?” I said.

“I said I don’t know.”

“But you’re sure you want to come with us now?”

“Yes.”

“You’re just like a cunt,” I said, “the way you change your mind. How do we know you’re not going to change it back again?”

That got a laugh from somebody.

“I won’t change my mind again,” Lou croaked.

“You’re sure about that?”

“Yes, I’m sure,” he said.

“I don’t know. I’ll have to think about it for a little while—and maybe by that time you’ll have changed your mind anyway.” I let that hang there for a minute.

“Well,” I said then, “let’s all sit down.”

I remained standing of course. When they were all seated and had lit their cigarettes and done all their coughing and seemed to have relaxed a little after my confrontation with Lou, I looked around at them with a smile.

“What a fine-looking body of men,” I said.

It was an oldie but it got a laugh out of all of them, except Lou of course, who sat farthest from me, and still hung his head.

"Okay," I continued, "we've had a few days now to think about what happened on Sunday. A couple of things are clear. One is that we seem to have gotten out of it without a scratch. Well, no, I can't really say that, can I?"

I looked at Pete, and that got another laugh.

"Well, with just one little scratch."

Still another laugh.

"All of which seems to prove that I was right, that they never reported the shootout."

There was a murmur and a nodding of heads.

"And the fact that they didn't report it," I continued, "tells us certain things about them—just as the fact that we didn't report it tells them certain things about us. Which brings me to the subject of this meeting. I've told all of you this individually, but now I'll say it again to all of you together. I have a feeling that those bastards are going to be laying for us out there this weekend."

I paused, waiting to see if anybody would say anything. But they all just gazed at me, except for Lou.

"Maybe I'm wrong," I said, "Maybe it's the farthest thought from their minds."

I paused again.

"God knows I hope so."

Again.

"But if there's the remotest possibility that we might get ambushed I think we have to take every precaution to see that it doesn't happen."

There was another murmur of assent.

"So I called this meeting to talk about precautions and about strategy."

Jim held up his hand.

"I have one question to bring up right away, Rex," he said. "Some of you say there were six of them last time, and some of you say there were seven. Anyway, there were roughly half a dozen of them facing you out there. This is my question. Do you think there's a possibility that they may reinforce?"

"Absolutely," I said. "But then, so will we. Well, Jim, you're our first recruit, aren't you?"

That got a laugh.

"I sure am," he said.

Pete raised his hand.

"Wait a minute," he said. "This is something I hadn't thought about at all."

"So?" I said.

"Well, Jesus, how many extra guys do you think they might bring along? Two or three? What if they brought ten?"

"Or twenty?" I said.

"Huh?"

"Well, Pete," I said patiently, "if there's the possibility that they may reinforce by one, there also has to be the possibility that they may reinforce by a thousand, right?"

"Man," he said.

"It's an unknown," I said. "But of course we're dealing with a good many unknowns in this thing. Will they be there at all? We don't know. If they are there, where will they be waiting for us? We don't know. How many of them will there be? I think the answer to that is probably that they'll bring along as many people as they can recruit, because, you see, if they *are* planning on being there, then somewhere they're having a meeting too, at which they're wondering the same things we're wondering, talking the same way we're talking, thinking about the same things we're thinking about, asking the same questions, and probably coming to the same conclusions."

"In other words—" Pete began.

"Yes, in other words," I said, "they'll probably figure that we'll bring along as many people as we can recruit. Therefore—"

"Rex," Bob said, "shouldn't that word be 'trust'?"

"You're right," I said. "We could probably recruit a thousand people if it came to that, but of course we'll only take men we know we can trust. What I propose is that each of us make up a list of guys who we think are reliable and also who would be worth a shit to us in a fire fight."

"You mean no fucking 4-F's," Bob said.

Everybody laughed.

"Yeah, that's what I mean," I said. "No fucking 4-F's."

Zeke raised one finger.

"How about Ray and Stanley?"

"Yeah," I said, "I definitely want Ray and Stanley."

"How about George Pomeroy?" Bob said.

"Yeah."

"Charlie Foote?" Pete said.

"Yeah, I want Charlie too," I said.

“Tom Treller would be a good man to have along on a deal like this,” Jim said. “Same goes for Bernie Cole.”

“Okay,” I said, “I put out paper and pencils on the table over there, and what I want you to do is all make up your own list, and I’m just going to count on you to come up with the right kind of guys, and I’m also going to count on you to approach these guys in a discreet way and explain the thing to them and then act as liaison between them and us when we get our plans finalized.”

I paused while they all went over to the table and picked up the pads and pencils I had laid out for them. Lou saw me looking at him and dropped his eyes. Just the sight of him burned me up. I would have enjoyed taking him downstairs right then and kicking his ass all over Bridge Street.

“The next thing I want to talk about,” I said after they had all settled down again, “is the matter of equipment. I assume that everybody who will be coming will have all the standard hunting gear like camouflage suits and canteens—but I also want every man to have a tin pot and a flak jacket.”

“Helmets?” Pete said. “Helmets and body armor? Where are we going to get that kind of shit, Rex?”

“Leave it to me,” I said. “I’m going to be working on it this afternoon.”

I paused and grinned.

“Oh, yeah,” Pete said, catching on.

Then they all caught on.

“Why don’t you bring along that M-60 tank you’ve got over there while you’re at it?” Bob said.

“Maybe I will,” I said.

That got a really big laugh.

“And now we come to another unknown,” I said. “The most crucial one of all. What kind of weapons will they bring along? Again, we don’t know.”

“What do you mean, Rex?” Jim said. “You don’t think they’d bring automatic weapons, do you?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “What do you think?”

“Christ, I just don’t know.”

“Well, I’ll tell you one thing,” I said. “We’re going to be taking along every bit of automatic shit we can lay our hands on ourselves.”

“Fucking right,” Zeke said. “I’m not going to get caught out there with a peashooter if there’s a chance them motherfuckers will be packing

Chicago typewriters. I'm going to have my little old AR18 with me."

"And I sure as shit am going to take my Schmeisser," Bob said.

"Well, of course we happen to be fortunate," I said, "to have with us here this morning a man who—"

I looked at Lou.

"Yeah, Lou baby," Zeke said. "You've got enough automatic shit to equip a Chinese brigade. This is your big chance, kid."

"Yeah, Lou, here's your chance to put all that shit to good use," Bob said.

"Lou, I'm putting you in charge of automatic weapons," I said. "By which I mean that I expect you to provide us with as many guns as you have in that little arsenal of yours that you think will be appropriate for this operation, and also to make sure that we have plenty of ammo to go with them. Okay, Lou?"

He had his face in his hands.

"Lou?"

He looked up at me.

"Yeah, Rex," he said.

"You better get on the ammo right away," I said. "You can get hold of all the 7.62 shit we'll need, can't you?"

He just stared at me.

"Lou? You can get hold of all the NATO shit we'll need, can't you?"

"How much do you think we'll need?" he croaked, finally.

"Well, I don't know," I said. "How much would you say?"

"I don't know, Rex," he said.

"Well, let's make it a hundred thousand rounds," I said.

His mouth popped open.

"A hundred thousand?"

"Yeah, a hundred thousand," I said. "Okay?"

He looked like I'd hit him over the head with a mallet.

"What's the matter?" I said. "Are you worried about the cost? Well, don't worry. I'm going to give you a blank check. This is going to be on me, Lou, so don't worry. Okay?"

"Okay, Rex."

"Now just a few details," I said. "We'll rendezvous at dawn on Saturday at a location we'll decide on later, and then move out right away, because I want to get out there as early as possible. We'll travel three or four guys to a car, not more. Besides the helmets and the flak jackets I'm also going to arrange to borrow a truck to carry all our shit in, because obviously it wouldn't look too good to have all that shit on

you if a cop stopped you, but the truck will be GI and the guys in the cab will have on GI uniforms, and so I don't think we'll have any trouble with the cops at all. When we get to Glass Hill we'll leave our cars about halfway up the hill and saddle up and then go the rest of the way up to the lodge on foot, with just the truck and my jeep."

I was about to go on when I heard a funny sound. It was like a soft little yelp, or a sob, or somebody choking on something. I saw everybody turn and look at Lou. He had his face in his hands again. Then he lifted his face and it was all flushed, and his eyes were bright, and his mouth was slobbery.

"Listen, you guys," he said, looking around at everybody and getting out of his chair. "Listen—"

"Yeah?" Bob said. "We're listening."

Lou stuck out the tip of his tongue and ran it quickly over his slobbery lips.

"*All you guys!*" he shouted. "*What's the matter with you? All of you! Sitting here like this! Talking like this about something like this! I can't listen to it any more! Listen! They're not going to be there! Nobody's going to be there! Hear me? There won't be anybody there! There won't be anybody there! There won't be anybody there!*"

"Hey, for Christ's sake, slow down!" Zeke shouted angrily. "You're getting fucking hysterical, Lou!"

"Zeke—" Lou said, turning to him and sort of sticking his hand out toward him. "Zeke—"

"Yeah? Come on, spit it out," Zeke said.

"Zeke, there won't be anybody there," Lou said.

He was croaking again.

"How do you know?" Zeke said.

"Because anybody with any common sense would know it! You guys, you're not using your common sense! This is crazy, can't you see that? You're just letting yourselves get carried away with this thing! My God! Helmets! Flak jackets! Automatic weapons! For what? For nothing! Those guys won't be there, I tell you! You'll just be making damn fools of yourselves!"

"Shit," Zeke said.

"No, Zeke, it's not shit," Lou said. "It's the truth, that's what it is. You guys, all of you! You know what you're doing? This is wishful thinking! You're just wishing that somebody will be there, that's all! Please see that! Can't you see it? *You want this goddam thing to happen! You want this goddam thing to happen!*"

“Lou,” Bob said, “why don’t you either get out of here or sit down and shut up?”

“Bob,” Lou croaked, going a couple of steps in his direction. “Bob, why do you want it?”

“Want what?”

“This slaughter, Bob.”

“What slaughter?”

“The slaughter that would happen if you guys had this wish come true.”

“Oh, shit,” Bob said.

“*Then why are you going out there on Saturday morning with your Schmeisser?*”

“Wait a minute, Lou,” Jim said calmly. “I don’t think you’ve been listening to a word we’ve been saying here. What we’re trying to do is prevent a slaughter, not make one. We think that if we go out there on Saturday morning somebody may take a shot at us and try to kill us, just as somebody took a shot at you on Sunday and damn near killed Pete. We don’t want that to happen. Ergo the helmet and the flak jackets. And we sure as hell want to be able to defend ourselves if we are fired on. Ergo the automatic weapons.”

Lou stared at Jim for a minute with his mouth open, and then he sagged back down on his chair.

“What are you accusing us of anyway, Lou?” Bob said. “That’s something I’d really like to know.”

“Yeah, I’d like to know that too,” Pete said.

“Yeah, Lou,” Zeke said. “We’ve all been friends for a long time, and here we don’t even know what you really think of us.”

“Zeke,” Lou croaked. “You’ve already killed one guy. You wouldn’t want to kill any more, would you?”

Zeke let out a horselaugh.

“Shit,” he said. “I’ve killed a hell of a lot more than one.”

“But that was in the *war*,” Lou said. “That was different.”

Zeke laughed again.

“Not so goddam different,” he said.

“Well, what if *you* should get killed?” Lou said. “What about your wife? What about your kids? What about you, Bob? What if you got all shot up? Have you thought about that? Pete, what if you got an arm blown off this time? What if—”

“Okay, hold it right there,” I said. “Lou, none of our guys are going to get killed. None of our guys are going to get anything blown off. The

worst thing that's going to happen to anybody on our side is if they don't watch where they're going and they get mixed up with some poison ivy. So I don't want to hear any more of this kind of shit out of you."

He looked flabbergasted.

"Rex, how can you say that?" he said. "If this goddam thing actually happened and we've got ten or twenty guys with automatic weapons and they've got ten or twenty guys with automatic weapons and we're all shooting at each other, how can you say that none of us guys would get hurt?"

I walked over to him and stood in front of him and pointed my finger right in his face.

"Because I'm going to be leading them," I said. "And I'm going to be looking out for them. And as long as they keep their discipline and follow orders and do just like I say, nobody will even get a scratch on their nose. Now, as for the other guys, what happens to them is their own business. If they're out there and they're laying for us and they fire so much as one stinking little .22-caliber round at us, then God help them, because we're going to blast them right off the fucking face of the earth."

"Betcherass," Zeke said.

"Right on, Rex," Pete said.

"Listen, we've got a right to defend ourselves, don't we, Lou? Or do you think we should give up completely and let those bastards see how chicken we are, and just stay home on the weekends from now on and watch TV?"

"Anyway, I don't see what he's so fucking excited about," Pete said. "He says they won't be there anyway. Isn't that what you said, Lou?"

Lou glanced around at everybody, looking more flustered and slobbery every minute.

"Of course they won't be there," he said. "I'm talking about the principle of the thing."

"The what?" Zeke said.

"*The principle of the thing!*" Lou howled. "*You guys sitting around here talking like morons! Talking about shooting and killing like it was a game!*"

"Why don't you just shut up, Lou?" Bob said.

"*Talking like crazy people! Talking like homicidal maniacs!*"

"I wish I'd never brought you now, Lou," Zeke said. "You told me you wanted to come to the meeting, that's all. You didn't give me any of this shit at the house."

“Shit,” Bob said.

“Why didn’t you give me any of this shit at the house, Lou?” Zeke said.

“Yeah, that’s what it is,” Bob said. “Shit.”

“Chickenshit,” Pete said.

“Yeah, chickenshit,” Bob said.

“From the very beginning he’s done nothing but bitch and moan and wail,” Zeke said.

“That’s all he knows how to do,” Bob said.

“You should have heard him yesterday morning,” Zeke said. “‘Rex says those guys are going to be laying for us this weekend.’ I swear to God I thought he was going to piss his pants.”

“Why don’t you run along home, Chickenshit?” Bob said.

“Yeah, we don’t need your brand of chickenshit around here, Chickenshit,” Zeke said.

“Beat it, Chickenshit,” Pete said.

“Yeah, clear out, Chickenshit,” Bob said.

Lou sort of moaned and got up out of his chair.

“*You guys*,” he said, “*you liked it.*”

“What did you say, Chickenshit?” Bob said.

“*You liked it!*”

“What was that, Chickenshit?” Pete said.

“*You liked it! You liked it!*”

“Can’t hear you, Chickenshit,” Zeke said. “Would you be kind enough to repeat that?”

“*You liked it! You liked it! You liked it!*”

Lou was backing away, toward the door. When he stumbled over a chair and almost fell, everybody roared with laughter.

“Hey, look out, Chickenshit!” Bob yelled.

“Yeah, don’t slip and break your neck on your own chickenshit, Chickenshit!” Zeke yelled.

Lou reached the door. When he started to turn the handle, Zeke ran over to him and grabbed him by the arm.

“Just remember this, Chickenshit,” he said. “One word out of you to anybody about this and I’ll send Ray and Stanley around to pay a little call on you. You know what I mean, don’t you, Chickenshit?”

Lou shook himself loose and started to open the door again.

“Wait a minute, Chickenshit,” Zeke said, grabbing hold of his arm again. “You heard me now, didn’t you?”

Lou nodded, staring down at his hand on the doorknob.

“Yeah, I heard you, Zeke,” he said.

Zeke let him go and he opened the door and went out.

Everybody just looked after him for a minute. Then they all turned back to me.

“What I’d truly like to know,” Jim said, “is how the hell that chickenshit little son of a bitch ever got that DSC.”

I started to speak, because I had wanted to say a few things on that subject myself, but then, suddenly, I realized that I didn’t have to say a word, because everything I had wanted to say had just been said so eloquently for me.

“Okay, Bob,” I said, “I’m putting you in charge of automatic weapons. There are a lot of guys in this town who have M-16’s. You round them up and get plenty of ammo for them. Get anything else you can lay your hands on. I know I can get a couple of Thompsons, and I’m pretty sure I can get a BAR. Any questions?”

TWELVE

Later on that morning I went looking for John Webster, the chief of my security system in the store. He was a very reliable, very loyal black who I had managed to buy away from the Maybock Police Department, where he had had an outstanding record.

I found him on the mezzanine keeping an eye on the crowd on the main floor from a position directly above the information booth. He was a natty dresser. He was wearing a dove-gray suit with a maroon tie and a big floppy silk maroon handkerchief in his breast pocket.

I drew him over to a quiet corner near the elevators.

"Where can I get in touch with Ogilvie?" I asked him, meaning his nephew Ogilvie Trumbull, a boy who happened to have the distinction of being the most decorated soldier in the history of Maybock, and that was going all the way back to the Civil War. He had every medal that was worth having except the Congressional Medal of Honor, and he probably would have gotten that too if he had stayed in the Army long enough. Unfortunately, ever since he had come back from Vietnam he had been going steadily downhill. He had been involved with drugs and had been picked up twice for assault, and he hadn't been able to keep a job.

When he had first come back from Vietnam, knowing that he was a relative of John Webster's and admiring his war record, I had told John to tell him that there was a job for him at the store anytime he wanted it, and when he had come in and applied for the job I had seen to it that he was given a prestige-type spot in the automotive department. Then he let me down by not even lasting a week. He worked for three days, and on the fourth never came back from his morning coffee break.

"I hear he's living with Sally Bowden," John said. "That's his oldest sister. Maybe I'm wrong, but that's what I hear. I haven't seen him for a while. He's been in Cleveland, you know."

"What was he doing there?"

John gave me a look.

"I don't know, Mr. Jeannette," he said. "And I don't want to know."

"Okay," I said. "What's his sister's address?"

"Sixty-three River Street. That's the first street on your right when you cross the bridge."

"Thanks, John," I said.

"I'm not asking you any questions."

"That's a good way to be," I said. "But I just want to talk to him about something, that's all."

He shrugged.

I looked around at the people on the mezzanine.

"Any problems?"

"No problems."

"I went back up to my office and called Sergeant Bellows at the armory and told him that I wanted to see him there around three o'clock. He said he would be there. Of course. If I had told him to paint himself blue he would have done it.

I didn't go to the Arms for lunch. There wasn't time for any of that now. And, naturally, I didn't play handball. I had a sandwich sent up to my office from the coffee shop in the store. Then I got into my car and drove across the Eagle River in search of Ogilvie Trumbull.

The river ran through the middle of the city. In the past year or so it had begun to stink. At first there had been a row of warehouses along River Street. Then they tore them down and built tenements. Now they had started tearing down the tenements, and there were holes between the buildings through which you could see the river and the heart of the Maybock business district on the other side.

Number sixty-three was a narrow, gritty red-brick building. Out in front there was a row of garbage cans and a pile of trash that stood about shoulder-high. The two buildings on either side were vacant. Through the smashed-out windows you could see into the empty blue and pink and yellow rooms.

When I got out of my car I smelled the garbage and heard the flies buzzing in the sunlight, and I could hear the hollow, eerie shouts of kids playing in the vacant buildings. I went up the steps and rang the bell of number sixty-three. Almost immediately a little girl opened the door, looked at me with big frightened eyes and then slammed it in my face.

A moment later a window above me opened and a woman asked me who I wanted.

"Ogilvie," I said.

"Who are you?" she asked. "What's your name?"

“Rex Jeannette,” I said.

The woman disappeared, but another one came to the window.

“Mr. Jeannette?”

“Hello,” I said.

“I’ll be right down.”

There was a short pause and then the door opened again.

“Mr. Jeannette?”

“Are you Ogilvie’s sister?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Sally Bowden?”

“Yes, sir.”

It was easy to see the resemblance. She looked about thirty. She was a handsome woman, and she was trying to act dignified and be charming even though she was out of breath from running down the stairs, and there were three little kids clinging to her legs.

“Is Ogilvie here?”

She bit her lip.

“He’s here,” she said wearily.

“Can I see him?”

She looked despairing.

“He won’t see anybody, Mr. Jeannette. Won’t talk to anybody. Won’t see anybody. Nothing.”

She looked behind her and then hesitated.

“You can try,” she said. “Want to try?”

“Okay,” I said.

She opened the door and let me go past her into the hall. It was dark and there was a breeze coming from the back of the building that had the stink of the river in it. In with the stink of the river was the stink of diapers and fried food. There were a lot of radios, all on different stations, playing upstairs and downstairs, and there were a lot of babies crying. Sally led me to a door at the far end of the hall, and she tapped on it softly.

“Ogilvie?”

“Who you got out there with you?” he asked.

“Mr. Jeannette.”

“Who?”

“Mr. Rex Jeannette.”

“What’s he want?”

Sally raised her eyes to the ceiling.

“There’s something I want to talk to you about, Ogilvie,” I said.

“Nothing I want to talk about.”

Sally breathed through her nose angrily.

“Ogilvie, who you talking to like that?”

“I’m just telling you there’s nothing I want to talk about to anybody.”

“Ogilvie, you’ve got no right talking like that.”

“Is it about a goddam job?” he asked.

“Wait a minute,” Sally said furiously. “I don’t want any of that swearing in this house.”

“I’m not interested in any more goddam jobs.”

“It’s not a job,” I said.

“What is it?”

“I’m not talking through a door,” I said.

There was a pause. I heard a drawer open and close, and the creak of bedsprings.

“Maybe tomorrow,” he said finally.

“You little snot,” Sally hissed, putting her face right up to the door.

“Tell him to come back tomorrow. Same time. Maybe I’ll feel more in the mood for talking then.”

“*Mood!*”

“Go on away now. Leave me alone.”

Sally threw up her hands and turned away from me, shaking her head in embarrassment.

“Okay, Ogilvie,” I said. “Tomorrow. Same time.”

Sally went to the front door with me and came halfway down the steps with me.

“I don’t know what’s the matter with him,” she said. “I know he wants something, but I don’t know what it is.”

I looked up at the sun.

“He wants something so bad,” she said. “I think he’s looked all over for it, but he can’t find it. Maybe he doesn’t know what it is either.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I said.

“Yes, sir. I’m sorry, Mr. Jeannette. I apologize for him.”

“That’s all right,” I said.

THIRTEEN

I got back in my car and drove back across the bridge and all the way over to the other side of town. On a side street I had never been down before in my life I found Ronnie Princer's sign shop, between a paint and body shop and a tavern. I looked through a dirty plate-glass window into an office that wasn't much bigger than a broom closet. When I went in, a bell on the back of the door jangled, and Ronnie stuck his head through a square hole in the wall, sideways.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," I said.

"Oh, yeah," he said.

He withdrew his head and a minute later a door opened, and he stood in the doorway looking at me quizzically.

"You're the guy from yesterday."

"My name's Rex Jeannette," I said. I went over to him and stuck out my hand.

He switched his cane from his right hand to his left and we shook hands.

"Ronnie Princer. Are you *the* Jeannette?"

"Yeah."

"Jeannette's?"

"Yeah."

"Nice to meet you. What have you got on your mind? Do you need a sign? Just want to talk? Reason I ask is, if you just want to talk, why don't we go next door and have a brew? I was just on my way there, as a matter of fact."

"Okay," I said.

"Let me turn off the lights."

He turned and swooped across the inner room, which had no windows and was incredibly grubby and cluttered and smoky. There were three lights burning. Before he switched off the last one he looked back at me with a bitter smile.

“Santa’s workshop,” he said. “I live in here and everything. Do my signs and cook and everything. That’s why you’ve got to get out of here and go have a couple of brews every once in a while.”

He swooped past me out the front door and we went next door to the tavern, which was dark and cool and very quiet. Even the TV was turned down very low. There was only one other customer, an old guy sitting at the far end of the bar with a glass of wine. The bartender had on thick glasses and he was reading the racing form, holding the paper around to the light from the street.

Ronnie yelled for a draft for us each, and we sat in a booth near the door.

“I guess you saved my ass yesterday,” he said.

He put a bill on the table.

“So I’m buying you this beer to pay you back.”

He laughed.

“That’s all it’s worth. My ass, I mean. Jesus, have you ever seen such a goddam basket case?”

“How’s it going, kid?” the bartender asked, putting our beers down in front of us.

Ronnie snorted.

“Okay, Jerry, okay,” he said softly, his eyes closed, nodding, his lips pursed in the same bitter smile. “Okay, okay, okay.”

The bartender made the change and went away.

“His son fell out of a helicopter near Danang,” Ronnie said. “They had to scrape him up with a spoon. The trouble with these people is that they’re like these people that if you tell them you’re from Chicago they want to know if you knew Frank Smith there. They don’t seem to realize that millions of guys went through Vietnam. They all think that if they describe their boy to you enough times and show you his picture and his letters often enough that it will come to you eventually. I never knew his son over there. I never heard of him. I wasn’t there when he fell out of the goddam thing. If he shows me that goddam picture one more time I’m going to brain him.”

“How did you happen to get in the sign business?” I asked.

“Huh?”

He gaped at me. He was still thinking about them scraping the kid up with a spoon, I guess.

“How did you happen to get in the sign business?”

“Jesus, I don’t know,” he said. “I got out of the hospital and hung around home for a long time trying to get used to the idea that I was a

creep, and I just couldn't seem to do it. What happened was that I started sleeping all the time because somehow I had gotten it in my head that one time I'd wake up and it would all be over and I'd have my leg back and I wouldn't be a creep any more. I went bananas, in other words, so I had to go to another hospital. A different kind, of course. And after I spent about a year there wrapped in wet sheets and everything, I managed to get used to being a creep, and then they let me go. So I applied for a government loan to start up a small sign shop, which wasn't hard for creeps to get. At least it wasn't then. I don't know about now. See, I used to have a little business on the side when I was in high school, making signs for all the school activities and all that shit, so I opened up this shop, with three guys working for me and a broad out front answering the phone, and six months later I lost it. The only stuff I had been doing that sold worth a damn was the twinkle-twinkle stuff like I was trying to sell Solon yesterday, so I got another loan and opened this crappy little place where I am now, and that's all I do now, just the twinkle-twinkle stuff. Which is fine, but you can go blind this way. Your nerves can go completely out on you. You can wind up right back there with the sheets and everything. Like, you find yourself hoping you don't get the job, because you'd rather get kicked in the nuts than make another one of those goddam signs. Which is why I really didn't mind yesterday so much. Anyway, that's how I got in the sign business."

I called to the bartender for two more beers. This time he didn't say anything but just made the change and left.

Ronnie swallowed half his beer in one long pull.

"I just don't give a shit," he said.

He took a long drag on his cigarette that made my lungs ache just looking at him.

"I don't consider this a real life any more. That's just how I happen to feel about it, and nobody can change it. Nothing that happens to me really counts now. I either want to have all the pieces I'm supposed to have or I'm not going to take it seriously. I don't care about a goddam thing any more. If I cared, hell, I'd be a junkie. But I don't even care enough to do that. Know what I mean?"

He raised his eyes quickly to see my expression.

"What do you want, anyway?" he asked.

I didn't say anything.

He glanced at me again, and his eyes narrowed.

"You may not believe this, friend," he said, "but I play a hand of

Russian roulette every night when my sweetie comes to see me. You ought to see her, by the way. I'm not kidding."

He looked over at the bartender.

"Hey, Jerry!" he shouted. "Is she beautiful, or isn't she?"

"Who's that, Ronnie?"

"My girl friend."

"Whoooeeee!"

Ronnie laughed.

"She's about forty but looks like maybe thirty-two, divorced, lots of money, a silver Continental, a big house out on the lake, a body that doesn't stop, a sweet, generous disposition, passionate as hell, all kinds of sexual expertise, if you know what I mean, no inhibitions whatsoever, dresses like Vogue, terrific taste in jewelry and all that shit, plus she worships the ground I walk on. Or creep on, if you prefer. Guess why. Because she thinks I resemble 'the young Montgomery Clift.' No kidding. She worshiped the ground he walked on all through high school and everything, and now she thinks she's finally found him in me. She could care less about the leg. In fact, maybe that adds to it. Who knows with these broads? She happened to see me in a drugstore up on Virginia Street one day, came right over to me, started talking. The next thing you know we're back here at my place in the sack, and she's eating me alive. And she's been all over me like that ever since. Her name's Beverly. Long blond hair. The bluest eyes you ever saw in your life. Absolutely cannot get enough of me."

"What about the Russian roulette?"

"Every night when she comes to see me, I get out my little old .38 and put one bullet in it. Then I spin the cylinder and stick it in my ear and pull the trigger."

"Why?"

"Because I want her to be right there watching when I blow my head off. And because it makes her cry."

"If you want to do it," I said, "why don't you just go ahead and do it? Put six bullets in it?"

He shook his head.

"It has to come as a surprise. That's the way I am. I could never do it if it was really definite."

I called for another beer, and Ronnie waited until Jerry went back to the bar before he spoke again. Then he leaned toward me.

"Listen, what do you want?" he said. "I'm serious."

"What are you doing Saturday?"

"Huh?"

"Are you going to be busy Saturday?"

"What are you talking about? Do you want one of these goddam signs? Is that it?"

"I need you to check out a place for me to see that it isn't booby-trapped."

"Huh?"

"Well, that was your specialty, wasn't it?"

He relaxed a little and smiled.

"Yeah, it was. Who told you?"

"I heard."

He nodded, smiling to himself.

"You bet your ass it was."

He relaxed some more, and let his head fall back, and got a slightly dreamy look in his eyes.

"I was the best there was, mister. When it was a really tough job, it was always me they called for. 'This looks like a bastard. See if you can get Ronnie Princer.' 'Find Ronnie Princer. Nobody but him can disarm this son of a bitch.' I was famous all over the Nam. From Eye Corps to the Delta. 'Mr. Gelignite,' that's what they called me."

"So what are you doing Saturday?"

He sat up straight.

"Is this for real?"

I nodded.

"Well, where's the place? What is it? Who wired it?"

"It's a hunting lodge I own on Glass Hill, which is over near the Sturrup River, the other side of Pembroke. Do you know the area?"

"I know where you mean."

"Last Sunday evening some friends of mine and I got shot at by some guys down by the river."

"No shit?"

"They wounded one of us."

"Did you know who they were? Had you ever seen them before?"

"Never. They were on the other side of the river. They were hunters, just like us."

"And they just started shooting at you?"

"That's right."

"Why would they do something like that?"

"I don't know."

"You didn't hassle them or anything?"

“No. All of a sudden one of them just fired, and hit the guy standing next to me in the head. Just creased him above the ear, luckily.”

“Then what?”

“One of our guys returned the fire, and hit one of them right between the eyes.”

“Jesus.”

“Then we all started blazing away on both sides of the river, and it got pretty hot and heavy for a while there. Then we pulled out and came home, and got the guy fixed up who had been hit. So this weekend we’re going back, but I have a feeling they’re going to be laying for us. Maybe bushwhack us. Maybe even booby-trap the lodge. I don’t want to take any chances. You know what I mean? How the hell do you know what somebody will do when they open fire on you like that for no reason at all? And they lost a man too, don’t forget.”

“You think he’s dead?”

“I know he is.”

“Cops never did anything?”

“Cops never heard about it. We never said anything. They must not have either. Are you interested?”

“Yeah, I’m interested.”

“You want to come on Saturday?”

He thought a minute.

“Yeah.”

“Lot of guys are going to be depending on you, you know.”

“Okay.”

“We’ll all be counting on you, Ronnie.”

“Well, I told you I’m the best, didn’t I, mister?”

“‘Rex,’” I said. “Call me ‘Rex.’”

“Okay, Rex.”

“Everybody’s going to be real relieved when I tell them that you’re going to be coming,” I said.

His face was sort of shining.

“Yeah?”

“They sure will be. Everybody’s been worried about the lodge. When I tell them that we’re going to have a Vietnam veteran with us who knows every trick in the book, they’re all going to breathe a lot easier.”

“You just tell them not to worry about a goddam thing, Rex. I can smell a place that’s been wired a hundred yards away, and I could neutralize the son of a bitch if it was Ho Chi Minh himself who wired it. You tell them that.”

“I’ll tell them,” I said.

He lit another cigarette and took another of his tremendous drags on it, and he put his head back and the dreamy look came back into his eyes.

“Saturday morning, Rex?”

“We rendezvous at dawn.”

“Okay, Rex.”

“I’ll call you and tell you where,” I said.

FOURTEEN

Sergeant Bellows, who was a tough old soldier with a cushy job as chief of maintenance and supply at the armory, had made a serious mistake a couple of years before. He had falsified the papers on a shipment of brand-new Garand M-1 carbines from the factory to make it look like he had received eight cases of the weapons instead of the actual ten, and he had stashed the other two in a secluded corner of the motor pool. Then, in the quiet of the night, when he was alone in the armory, he had proceeded to uncrate the weapons, clean off the goo in which they had been packed at the factory, and sell them, through a friend on the outside, for forty-five dollars apiece, which was a saving of roughly fifty dollars to the consumer.

Unfortunately for Sergeant Bellows, an acquaintance of mine happened to buy one of the guns and told me about the beautiful deal he had gotten on it, which had set me to thinking, and after I had checked with the factory on the serial number and done a little more detective work, it had been an easy matter to trace the missing carbines to Sergeant Bellows and make him sign a confession with the understanding that if he ever pulled anything like that again I would expose him, and that would be the end of his cushy job. In the meantime, of course, I had him completely in my power.

So I knew I could get what I wanted.

I found Sergeant Bellows waiting for me at three o'clock in the assembly room. He came toward me tucking in his shirt hurriedly and buttoning it. He was disgustingly obese, and even now, when the weather was turning cool, he sweated like a hog all the time. He was supposed to wear his uniform when he was on duty, but a good deal of the time he went around bare from the waist up and with a revolting sweat towel hanging from his belt.

He approached me reeking of beer and sweat. Even though he had just put it on, his shirt was already turning dark from sweat, and his face, which he had just gotten through mopping with his awful towel,

was slick and shiny.

"Is there anybody around?" I asked him.

"Just Sergeant Gallagher, sir," he said. "He's upstairs in his office working on some reports."

"Well, go and get a clipboard," I said. "I want you to make a list."

"A list, sir?"

"Yes, a list."

"Yes, sir."

He turned to go.

"And come back without that towel," I said. "I never want to see that goddam towel again, do you hear me?"

"Yes, sir."

When he came back I had him sit down at the table over in the corner where the piano was.

"This is confidential," I said.

"Yes, sir."

"I'm going to borrow some equipment from the armory over the weekend. I want you to have it all organized and loaded up and waiting for me at dawn on Saturday. Got that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thirty flak jackets."

He hesitated, but he didn't look up.

"Yes, sir," he said, writing it down.

"Thirty steel helmets, with liners."

"Yes, sir."

"And with camouflage netting."

"Yes, sir."

"A BAR, with five thousand rounds of ammo."

"Yes, sir."

"How many submachine guns do we have now?"

"Three Thompsons, sir."

"I'll take them too, and, say, a couple of thousand rounds for each of them."

"Yes, sir."

"A box of grenades. How many in one of those boxes? Twelve? Make it two boxes."

"Yes, sir."

"How many walkie-talkies do we have?"

"We have five, sir, but only three of them are working right."

"Okay, give me the three, then. And three flare guns, with a box of

flares."

"Yes, sir."

"I want you to load everything onto a six-by, and I want you to have the six-by all gassed up and ready to go and waiting for me out at the motor-pool gate."

For the first time he allowed himself to look up. His eyes were bulging and the sweat was pouring off him worse than ever.

"On Saturday," he said.

"At dawn."

"Yes, sir," he said.

After that, I went on home.

When I got there I had a martini in the den, but it didn't do much good. I was feeling very keyed-up. I couldn't seem to keep still. I started pacing back and forth, and finally I did what I always wound up doing when I was feeling that way. I stretched out on the sofa and closed my eyes, and I fell asleep almost instantly.

The telephone woke me up at ten minutes after six. It was Pete telling me that he had six guys lined up, and he named them off for me. They sounded all right. I knew all but one of them. I wrote the names down in my notebook.

Then Ellen knocked on the door and I told her to come in, and she told me what we were going to have for dinner. Roast loin of pork, baked potatoes, fresh peas, homemade applesauce, homemade rolls, and for dessert homemade apple pie with either cheese or ice cream, and coffee.

It was just about the only sort of conversation we ever had, but, then, I never asked her to get fat. When I married her she was the prettiest girl in town by far, and then she had to go and get fat. And she did it all by herself. Nobody put a gun to her head and told her to stuff herself until she could hardly waddle.

So I said fine, and she left me alone again.

The guys called in one by one that evening, and I kept taking down the names they gave me, and when it was all tallied up it looked like we would have close to thirty guys altogether, which was about what I had figured on.

I told everybody that there would be a meeting in my office at nine the following night.

FIFTEEN

The next day I went back to Sixty-three River Street at the same time as the day before, like Ogilvie had said I should. I made sure that it was the *exact* same time.

It was obvious that Sally had been waiting for me, because as soon as I got out of the car I saw her face in the window next to the front door, and she opened the door before I even had to knock.

This time there didn't seem to be any kids around, and the place was quiet.

"Is he here?" I asked.

"He's here," she said.

We stood together in the dark hallway, and I had the feeling that behind all the doors and walls people were listening.

"Mr. Jeannette," she said in a low voice, looking away and shaking her head, "I really am worried about that boy. It can't be right for somebody just to sit around in a room like that all the time."

"What does he do in there?"

"He says he's working on a book, but all he does is make some doodles on a piece of paper once in a while."

I happened to look up and saw a small boy looking down at me from the second-floor landing.

"It was even better the way it used to be," she said, "when he was always going out and getting in trouble. At least you thought you could understand him a little bit then."

She glanced at me, and then led me along the hall, shaking her head and murmuring to herself. When we reached Ogilvie's door she took a deep breath.

"Ogilvie?" she said.

"Is he with you?"

"Yes, he's here, Ogilvie."

"Go away, then. Leave him there."

"Yes, Ogilvie."

She shrugged, and went off down the hall.

I heard a chair scrape back, then the lock on the inside of the door clicked and Ogilvie opened the door a crack.

I saw one eye, peering at me like the kid on the stairs. The wind swept through the crack, bringing the stink of the river.

"She gone?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Come on in."

He had lost a lot of weight since I had last seen him in the store, and he had been skinny even then. He was wearing a white T-shirt and khaki pants and leather sandals. He wore his hair in a moderate Afro, but he didn't have any goatees or any of that shit. He looked very clean, and the room looked very clean. There was nothing in it but a cot, a bureau, a desk and a couple of chairs. There wasn't even a rug on the floor or curtains on the window. The room looked dark because the sun was on the other side of the building, and he didn't have any lights on. On the desk there was a pad of paper and a ballpoint pen, nothing else. The wind blowing through the window not only stank but was cold.

"Sit down," he said.

He sat on the cot. I sat on the chair by the desk.

"I'm not feeling too good," he said.

"What's the matter?"

He shook his head.

"I don't know. Mostly, I can't seem to concentrate."

He had a scar on his throat, and there was scar tissue all up and down his right arm. I knew he had three Purple Hearts.

"She says you spend all your time in here. You never go out. What are you supposed to be doing?"

"Working on my book."

"What's it about?"

"The difficulties of the young people of my generation trying to make it in the world like it is now."

I glanced over at his pad of paper. The page was blank, except that he had written his name at the top.

"I used to be able to concentrate," he said. "You know, I got good grades all the way through high school. Ask Mr. Speyer about me in physics, or Mr. Thompson in math. I got nothing but A's and B's the whole way through, even in the football season when I had to be out practicing every afternoon. Reason was, in those days I could sit down with the books before an exam and in a couple of hours I'd have it all

down cold. I couldn't do that now."

He paused and looked out at the river.

"You know why?"

"Why?"

"Because nothing really seems very important to me any more. That's how it's been ever since I came back from Vietnam. I mean, over there you never had that problem. There were two things you had to do every day and they were both very important, killing the other guys and trying to keep them from killing you. There was nothing two-ways about it. You never had to think about it, and look at it from all kinds of different angles, and then say, well, maybe, but then, on the other hand, maybe not. Right? So, what I'm saying, I never had any trouble concentrating over there. I was all concentration, and not only for myself either. I found that out soon. If you're going to stay alive in action you have to learn never to count on anybody's concentration but your own. Well, hell, you know."

"Yeah, I know," I said.

He looked back at me.

"That's why I couldn't make it at the store. I wanted that job, you know. Like Michigan. I always wanted to go to Michigan. That was my big dream. But then, when I came back I didn't even try. I could have gotten in, I guess, but I knew I wouldn't last."

He sort of sagged all at once, letting his shoulders droop and his head fall forward, and sat there with his hands clasped.

I couldn't get over how clean the room was. Everything looked like it had been scrubbed down meticulously with soap and water. You had the feeling that you could have gone over the whole place with white gloves and you wouldn't have found a speck of dust, and that even the cracks between the floorboards had been cleaned out thoroughly with a toothpick or something. What the room really reminded me of was a barracks on inspection day.

"I was dealing dope for a while," he said. "I thought maybe the excitement and everything would snap me out of it, but I couldn't concentrate on that either. So then I started using the shit myself, and I liked it a lot. In fact, I liked it so much that I got off it right away, because I knew what would happen. The way I feel, you know? When I'm this way? In my present state of mind?"

I nodded.

"Finally I got involved with the BRF. You know what that is?"

"They want to line up all the whites and shoot them."

“Not all of them,” he said.

“Just most of them.”

“That’s right. Which may not be a bad idea, basically, but I went to the big convention in Cleveland and I just walked out right in the middle of the speeches.”

He paused.

“I came back here, and I’ve been trying to teach myself how to concentrate again. I figure this is the only way you can do it. All alone in a room like this.”

He stretched out on the bed and folded his arms across his face.

“But I don’t really think I’m getting anywhere,” he said.

He raised one arm to look at me.

“Who told you where I was?”

“John Webster.”

“Are you sure he didn’t pester you to give me another chance at that job?”

“No.”

“Why did you come here, then?”

“What are you doing tomorrow?”

“Huh?”

“What are you doing tomorrow?”

“What’s tomorrow?”

“Saturday.”

He gave me a disgusted look.

“Tomorrow I’m doing the same goddam thing I’m doing today. What do you think?”

“I could use you tomorrow.”

“What for?”

“Can anybody hear us?”

“Not if you don’t yell.”

“I need a good man like you with plenty of guerrilla warfare experience.”

“Huh?”

I told him the story, and while I talked he listened intently and slowly uncoiled and sat up on the edge of the bed and leaned toward me so that he could catch every word I said, because I was speaking very low, and his eyes were wide and shiny and never blinked and stared straight into mine.

SIXTEEN

At four o'clock that afternoon I called the Shangri-La Motel and told Hollis Chaney I wanted a room for that night.

"Okay, Rex," he said. "Wait a second now. Let me see what I've got. Okay, the number is Five."

"Fix it up nice," I said. "Flowers, etc. And make sure there's plenty of ice cubes."

Then I called Paula. She wasn't there the first time I tried, but when I called again at four-thirty she answered.

"I want to see you tonight," I said. "I'll be in Room Five at the Shangri-La Motel. In case you don't know where that is, it's about six miles south on Route 7. Come at ten-thirty. Just come right to the room. Knock twice. I'll be there. Got that? Shangri-La Motel. Room Five. Ten-thirty."

I didn't give her a chance to say no. I just hung up. Then I waited in my office for ten minutes to see if she would call back. She didn't, so I went on home and spent a couple of hours packing up the gear I would be taking with me the next day and loading it into my jeep.

I had dinner and then a couple of drinks in the den, and then I went back to the store, arriving there at about a quarter of nine. We stayed open until ten on Mondays and Fridays. The guys started coming in at nine, and we had our meeting. It didn't last long. They all wanted to go home and get their gear together and go to bed early if they had to get up before dawn. When I told them I was bringing Ogilvie they thought that was hot shit. Personally, most of them hated blacks, but in a thing like this they didn't let prejudices stand in the way of our having a goddam good soldier on our side, particularly a Vietnam veteran who knew all the latest wrinkles.

I told them that I had made all the arrangements at the armory for the truck and the Thompsons and the BAR and the helmets and the walkie-talkies and the flak jackets, etc. Then I told them that I wanted one of them to be responsible for getting me a couple of drivers for the truck,

and that I wanted the drivers to show up in fatigues, so that they would look strictly GI.

I broke up the meeting, with the understanding that we would rendezvous the next morning at four-thirty in the alley that ran along behind the armory, near the gate of the motor pool.

As everyone was leaving, something rather unnerving happened. Bob came over to me and asked if I would like to go somewhere and have a quick drink with him.

I said no, I had several things to take care of in the store before it closed. I guess I may have sounded slightly rattled when I said it, because he gave me what I thought was a searching look.

But I didn't dwell on it.

I stayed in the store until ten minutes before ten, and then I took a bottle of scotch from the bar in my office and went down and got one of the guards to bring my car around for me.

I reached the Shangri-La with plenty of time to spare. It was a pretty classy place, set back off the highway in some pines. I pulled up in front of the office and tapped my horn a couple of times. Hollis looked out and recognized my car and came out with the key to Room Five.

I gave him two twenties.

"Enjoy yourself," he said, with a grin, but not really in a wise way. He knew better than that.

I parked in front of Number Five and took my bottle and went in, I was almost positive that I had been there before, but then I figured that at one time or another I had spent at least a night in every one of the rooms at the Shangri-La. They were all well furnished and very clean, and the beds were comfortable. You got a sitting room, a bedroom, a small kitchen, a bathroom, and a color TV. Not that I ever had much use for the latter.

For me, Hollis had put flowers in both the sitting room and the bedroom, a stereo record player and a bunch of "mood music" records in the sitting room, and in the refrigerator all different kinds of fruit and cheese and fancy sandwiches, etc., from the delicatessen in the shopping center down the road. He did it more or less as a joke, but actually I thought it was a nice touch.

I took off my jacket and tie and made a drink right away, and then, since it was so silent in the sitting room that I could hear the faint ringing in my left ear that I had had ever since the war, I put a record on the stereo.

I had just sat down and lit a cigarette when I heard a car drive up.

The car door slammed, and I waited, holding my breath, but then I heard whoever it was go into the room next door, and I relaxed.

People kept coming and going. I heard doors opening and then closing all around me, voices, car doors slamming, people walking along on the gravel in the driveway.

But, strangely, at about ten-thirty it got quiet outside.

Then I head a car come along the driveway and park right in front of my door. I saw the glare of the headlights against the venetian blinds, and then they went out. Then the door of the car closed and someone came toward my door.

Two soft taps.

I got up and opened the door. It was Paula, but her face was partly in shadow, and for an instant she didn't look anything like herself. Of course it was just the way the light fell, and as soon as she moved her face slightly I saw that it was her.

"Come in," I said.

She glanced back at her car, and then came past me into the room.

"Am I on time?" she asked, looking around.

"Right on the dot," I said.

"Did you know I would come?"

"Yes."

She had on a raincoat and leather sandals and carried a large leather bag slung over her shoulder.

"When I left he was in the garage getting his stuff together to go to Glass Hill tomorrow. I said I was going over to visit Marcie Dixon. I think he knew something was going on. He could probably see that I was excited."

The light in the room was dim. I had turned off every light in the place except for the little one over the stove in the kitchen.

She turned on a light, and then she went and glanced into the kitchen and the bedroom.

"This is nice," she said.

I had hoped she wouldn't be nervous, but she was.

"Want a drink?"

"I want you to do something first."

She put her bag down on a chair.

"You know, break the ice."

She took off her raincoat. She had on a sort of tight knit dress.

I was getting all of my symptoms. My skin was crawling, I had the tightening in my stomach, my groin was glowing, etc. Then, when I took

her in my arms and began kissing her and feeling her up and realized that she wasn't wearing a solitary thing under the dress, and I started squeezing those big tits of hers and that beautiful ass, I wanted to lay her down on the couch and screw her right then and there, but I controlled myself, because I could tell that she was still nervous, and I knew that in a case like this you could ruin everything if you tried to go too fast.

So, after a while, I knocked it off and went and made us each a drink, and then I put another record on the stereo, and we sat on the couch and drank and smoked and messed around slightly, kissing and touching, and looking at each other, but not talking much. Then, all of a sudden I got up and pulled her to her feet and made her kick off her sandals, and we started dancing.

"Say, you're very good," she said, smiling, and looking at me in a funny way, as if she was seeing something in me that she had never imagined was there. But she was absolutely right. I was very good.

We kept dancing, although more than anything else it was just swaying and rubbing our bodies together in time to the soft, slow, dreamy music, and paused now and then to work on our drinks and take a quick drag on our cigarettes. By the time she had finished her second drink I noticed that her hands had stopped being so clammy, and I no longer got the feeling that inside her a motor was racing while on the outside she was smiling and trying to act like she was perfectly at ease, and I slipped my hand under her dress and up between her legs.

"How long do you want me to stay?" she said. "All night?"

"Can you?"

"If you want me to, I will. Whatever you want. You could ask me to do anything and I'd do it. That's how I feel about you."

"You stay, then."

She gave me a long kiss, and started biting me.

"Now," I said.

"Then I'd better go and lock the car," she said. "There's a real expensive camera in the glove compartment."

"I'll do it," I said.

I went out and locked her car. Then I took out the little French MAS automatic that I always kept in my glove compartment and put it in my pocket, and locked my car.

For a minute I stood looking at the sky. It was a very clear night, with a pleasant chill in the air. Tomorrow would be a beautiful day, I thought.

Then I went back in and took her into the bedroom and took her dress off. She was a pretty fabulous sight lying there nude on the bed, waiting for me. I put the automatic on the night table and turned out the light and got undressed.

"I've thought about this for a long time," she whispered.

But it turned out to be kind of a depressing experience. It turned out that way, I guess, because she simply tried too hard, and the reason she tried so hard, as I realized finally, was that she had honestly fallen in love with me. It wasn't an act. It wasn't just something that she had talked herself into and was trying to make me believe too so that the whole thing would seem more exciting and glamorous and intense and sexy. It was absolutely true, and therefore, because she was in love with me, she wanted to do everything for me that you could do for a man in bed and do it all spectacularly well, and I knew that she probably did a lot of things that she didn't ordinarily do and let me do a lot of things to her that she didn't ordinarily allow, because she was a little awkward at it, maybe even clumsy, anyway slightly uncertain, and instead of giving me ecstasy, like she wanted to, and impressing me with her abandonment and wildness and passion, she wound up making me sad.

"Happy?" she asked.

I tried not to let it show. I put on a big act of pretending that she was the greatest thing that had ever happened to me, which just wasn't true, and which I hated myself for. But you can never fool anybody that way anyway, and I saw the look in her eyes when we were lying there sharing a cigarette and cooling off a little, even though she tried to look pleased.

Then, to make things worse, she said a couple of things that she just plain shouldn't have.

For one thing, she started talking about how good it had been with me. Okay, although I'm not that crazy about instant replays myself. And then she had to start comparing the way it had been with her and me with the way it was with her and Bob. It was supposed to make me feel good, I knew that, but she would have been a lot smarter if she had just left him completely out of it. Why the hell couldn't she have seen that?

"I don't know," she said, "I just have the feeling somehow that we were made for each other."

Huh?

I didn't go for that brand of shit. What the hell did she think this was? Wuthering Heights?

And then she started asking me if I didn't think she could make me

very happy, and talking all about how wouldn't it be so wonderful and marvelous if we could be together like this all the time, etc.

So far so bad.

But then she really tore it.

"And why shouldn't we be happy?" she said. "Why must I live in misery and frustration with him? And, Rex, everybody knows you're not happy with her."

Meaning Ellen, of course.

Which was a mistake, because it was a funny thing with me but no matter how I may have happened to feel about Ellen myself, I had never said a word against her to anybody in my life, and usually people had had brains enough not to say anything against her to me. The fact was that she happened to be very pure and good and kind and loyal, which was a lot more than you could say for most people, and I had been very much in love with her once besides, and if she had gone and let herself turn into a butterball and it disgusted me now just to look at her, well, that was between her and me, and it was nobody else's goddam business.

But I didn't say anything. I just got up and put on my parts and went to the kitchen and made myself another drink.

When I went back to the bedroom, she was in the bathroom.

So I went and sat on the couch in the sitting room, and in a few minutes she came out with her dress on.

She put on her sandals and her raincoat and picked up her bag.

It was a quarter after two.

"I know you don't like me," she said, and I could tell just from her voice that she was going to cry.

I didn't say anything.

"Well, you don't have to worry," she said. "You won't ever see me again."

I still didn't say anything.

She started to say something else but burst into tears and ran for the door. She couldn't get the lock to turn and started pounding on the door and crying hysterically, and I had to go and turn the lock for her. She ran out, slamming the door behind her. Then her car door slammed and she really tore up the gravel in the driveway getting out of there.

So then I went on home myself.

SEVENTEEN

When I got home I didn't know quite what to do with myself. It was about three o'clock then, and there was only an hour and a half before I had to go and rendezvous with the guys. Against my better judgment, I decided to take a nap on the couch in the den.

I put my traveling alarm clock on the floor beside the couch and set it, and when it went off at four o'clock I almost let it run all the way down before I could pull myself awake enough to sit up and shut it off.

I was really sleepy.

I dragged myself into the kitchen and made a cup of coffee that was so strong the spoon practically stood straight up in it. While I was gulping that down and eating a mess of the biscuits and honey and cold bacon that Ellen had left out for me, as she always did on the nights before I was going to Glass Hill, I put on thermal underwear and a quilted camouflage suit.

Then I strapped on a web ammo belt with a regular GI holster for sidearms, and I went back to the den and unlocked the gun case and took out two rifles and my Colt .45 automatic from the service. I stuck a clip in the handle of the Colt and slammed it home and then dropped that big son of a bitch into the holster.

I slipped a bottle of whiskey into the picnic basket that Ellen had made up for me and left on the kitchen table and took it out to the jeep along with the rifles, and I was ready to go.

But before I left I went back into the kitchen and took a dex.

By the time I got over to the armory the dex had started to work and I was feeling good. In the darkness I could see a lot of cars lined up along the street near the motor-pool gate and little knots of guys standing around in the street and sitting on the fenders of the cars and cigarettes glowing.

Dawn was just breaking. It was clear and cold, but there was no wind.

As soon as I parked and got out of the jeep there was a big stirring among the guys, and right away I began to get the feeling I always did

when I took over command of a group of men, that my presence electrified them and pulled them together and made a cohesive force out of what had been nothing but a crowd.

Guys started moving toward me and trying to get in close to me, but of course I didn't permit anything like that, even though I knew most of them personally. This wasn't a softball game we were going to, and I wasn't that kind of a leader. Not a man of the people. More the man on a horse. I strode down the middle of the street between them, with the Colt slapping against my thigh and the weight of it feeling good there, and they gave way before me.

"Hi, Rex," they said, or, "'Morning, Major," or, "'Lo, Skipper."

I was pleased to see that most of them were in camouflage as I had suggested, and I noticed that practically all of them were wearing sidearms.

And I nodded to them. "Good morning," I would say quietly, civil but distant. "Hello, nice to see you," I would say.

As I had hoped, Jim and Zeke and Bob and Pete were waiting for me at the gate. They gathered around me immediately, closing me off from the others, and Bob had a clipboard on which he had written down the names of all of our volunteers. He had been checking them off as they had arrived, and he said that it looked now as if every single man who had said that he wanted to go was going to show up. At the moment we were only lacking a couple of guys who he knew for a fact were on their way and would get here any minute. He held a flashlight while I looked over the list briefly.

"Is Ronnie here?"

"Yeah."

"Ogilvie?"

Yeah?

I didn't want to hang around there too long.

"Get me the two men to drive the truck."

"Will do."

Sergeant Bellows was standing on the other side of the gate, which was still locked, looking sort of scared.

I motioned to him and he opened up.

"Everything in order?" I asked him.

"Yes, sir. Everything. Just like you said."

Bob brought in the two drivers. I recognized them both. Andy Webber and George Brodie. I told them that I was going to lead the way in my jeep and that I wanted two cars behind me, then the truck and then the

rest of the cars, and I wanted the whole line to be strung out with plenty of space between each vehicle so that we wouldn't look too obvious going through towns.

Bob came up and said that the guys who had been missing had just arrived. I told him to make sure that everybody knew where we were going and to pass it along that we would rendezvous again and get into harness about a mile into the woods from the turnoff on the road going up to Glass Hill.

Jim asked me if I wanted a dex. I said I'd already taken one, but he gave me another to stick in my pocket in case I needed a little pick-me-up later on.

Guys kept coming up to him and he kept reaching into one of the pockets of his camouflage suit and handing out the caps. I didn't ask him if he'd brought along morphine and some tools in case anybody got hurt, I just assumed that he had. You don't like to talk about shit like that before you go into action. You just like to be positive in your own mind that you're going to clobber the other guys but that you and your guys are going to come out of it without a scratch.

I said let's move out, and there was another big stirring among the guys. It was starting to get light in a hurry, and in the light I saw that some girls had come in cars to see some of the younger guys off. That disturbed me because it meant that the really tight security I had hoped for was out the window, but there was nothing I could do about it at that late stage of the game, so I chose to ignore it.

I told Pete to come along and ride shotgun in the jeep, and I told Zeke that I wanted him to bring up the rear of the column in his car and see that we didn't lose anybody back there.

Pete and I started walking down the street toward the jeep, and along the way I caught sight of Ronnie sitting in his van and gave him the high sign, and then I saw Ogilvie leaning against the fender of a car and gave him the high sign too. He grinned and gave me a Black Power salute, and I noticed that he was wearing a black beret along with his camouflage.

We climbed into the jeep and I turned around, running up over the curbs on both sides of the street to make the circle. In the rear-view mirror I saw the guys scattering and getting into their cars and I heard the engines starting. The truck came lumbering out of the motor-pool gate and took up its position two cars in back of me.

When I saw that everybody was in line I stuck my arm out of the jeep and raised my hand and let it fall, and then we moved out.

EIGHTEEN

When the whole column was deep in the woods I stopped the jeep and shut off the engine. For a moment, after the truck and the rest of the cars had closed up the line and all the engines were shut off, there was silence. But just for a moment. Then everybody started getting out of the cars and coming forward along the line toward me. They talked among themselves, but they kept their voices down and there wasn't any laughing or fooling around.

I climbed up on the hood of the jeep and, when everybody had gathered around me, I said, "Smoke 'em if you got 'em."

That got a laugh.

Some lit up cigars and cigarettes. Others were swigging booze from pint bottles and hot coffee from thermos bottles.

Although the sun was well up by then, it was cold as hell in the trees.

"Some of you have been here before and some of you haven't," I said. "For those of you who haven't, this is Glass Hill. My hunting lodge is about seven miles up this road. We're going to the lodge first and check it out and establish our base there, and then we're going to hump it down the other side of the hill to the Sturrup River, which is about a mile and a half from the lodge."

"Straight down," Zeke said.

That got another laugh.

"I'm not going to make any speeches," I went on. "You're all veterans, all combat men. You don't need any speeches. I'm just going to say that from this point on anything could happen. So let's saddle up. In the six-by there are steel helmets and flak jackets for everyone. Bob?"

"Yo!"

"You hand that stuff out, okay?"

"Yeah, Rex."

"Well, let's get cracking, then."

The guys all started to turn and go to the truck.

"One more thing," I said.

They all stopped on a dime. I guess it was something in my voice.

"I don't know exactly what it means," I said, "but a car has gone up this road recently. Definitely this morning. Probably only a few minutes ago. I've been following the tracks on the road all the way in here in the jeep, and they look very fresh to me."

For a minute they all just gaped at me. Then one of the guys went around to the front of the jeep and looked at the road.

"Yeah," he said, and then all the others went and looked at the road too.

Rain had smoothed out the sand on the road, and the tracks of a car were clean and sharp.

"Yeah," they all said.

Then they went past me again, down the road to the truck. As one of them went by, a kid named Jerry Plotsky, who I happened to know because he had been a big star on the Maybock High baseball team before he had gone to Vietnam, reached up and offered me a swig from his pint bottle.

I took a healthy pull on it.

"All the way," I said, handing him the bottle back. I knew he had been in the Airborne.

He gave me a big grin.

"Yeah, all the way," he said.

Pete went back to the truck and brought me a tin pot and a flak jacket, and I put them on.

"Get me one of the Thompsons," I told him. "And pass it along that we're advancing exactly two minutes from now."

He came back wearing a helmet and a flak jacket and carrying one of the submachine guns and some ammo.

I slapped the magazine into place and cocked the weapon and leaned it up against the dashboard. Then I told Pete to take over the wheel of the jeep because I wanted to stand up the rest of the way up the hill and watch the road ahead.

The engines started up behind me and Pete started the jeep, and I gave a hand signal and the column moved forward.

I felt very good, with the dex and the whiskey, and with the excitement of leading all those armed men up the hill and knowing that they were all keeping an eye on me up ahead of them in the jeep and counting on me not to let us fall into any traps.

I leaned forward over the top of the windshield, holding onto it with one hand and keeping the other free to grab for the Thompson if

necessary.

As we kept going higher up the hillside the road got steeper and we moved slower and slower until we were just crawling around the bends and grinding along in bottom gear in the few straight stretches.

All of a sudden my heart stopped.

We had just come around a bend and the road ahead had been completely screened off from my view by the dense trees, and on top of that the sun suddenly coming through a small opening in the trees at a low angle had caught me right in the eyes and momentarily blinded me.

But I had seen a man standing in the road far up ahead of us.

"Stop!" I yelled.

Pete had seen him maybe an instant later than me.

"Rex, look!" he had yelled.

I brought up the Thompson instantly, ready to spray the whole area ahead of us.

The cars behind us had stopped and guys were running forward to the jeep.

"Keep down!" I yelled. "Spread out!"

They started hitting the dirt on both sides of the road and taking cover behind trees and rocks. They had brought their rifles with them and I could hear the bolts sliding and locking and clips being shoved into breeches and safeties being let off.

"He's coming this way," Pete said.

I had looked away for an instant to check the position of the men and see that they were deployed correctly. I looked back and saw that Pete was right. The man was coming slowly down the road toward us.

He had been standing in deep shade at first and I hadn't been able to make him out clearly. Now I saw that he was small and was dressed in camouflage.

"Get my glasses for me, Pete," I said, feeling like a fool for not having them ready, "They're under your seat."

He got my binoculars out and removed them from the case. I gave him the Thompson and focused quickly, and what I saw infuriated me.

"Take a look," I said, handing the glasses to Pete.

He gave me back the Thompson and took a look.

"I'll be damned," he said. "Chickenshit."

"Yeah," I said. "Chickenshit."

I turned to the guys.

"Okay, stand easy," I said. "It's a friendly." I paused for a minute. "At least I guess that's what you'd call it."

The guys came out of cover and gathered around the jeep, and I told Pete to get my bottle out of the picnic basket and we both had a couple of swigs while we leaned against the windshield and watched Lou coming toward us.

"Christ," Bob said, coming up beside me. "Is that who I think it is? Old Lou Chickenshit?"

"It sure is," I said.

"It's Lou Chickenshit," Bob said to the guys. "You all know Chickenshit Lou, don't you? He didn't want to come with us. He was too goddam chickenshit. Now here he is holding up the whole goddam war while he comes chickenshitting down the road."

The guys laughed and started doing barnyard imitations, and I had to quiet them down.

Finally, Lou stopped right in front of the jeep and stood there looking up at me. If it was possible, he looked even paler and shittier than he had the last time I had seen him. He looked like he was going to bust out crying at any moment.

"What are you doing here?" I asked him.

He held up his hand and opened his mouth but didn't speak.

"I asked you a question," I said.

He looked like a lunatic, and the very sight of him made me so disgusted that I really had to control myself to keep from going down there and crushing him and tossing him off to the side of the road like an empty beer can.

"I want to go with you," he said.

"What?"

"I want to go with you, Rex."

"Get out of here, Lou," I said.

"Let me, Rex."

"We don't want you, Lou," I said.

"Rex, please let me go with you."

"I said we don't want you, Lou," I said.

"Rex, I want to go. You've got to let me."

"You heard me, Lou," I said.

"Please, Rex."

"Go home, Lou," I said.

"Rex, for Christ's sake—"

"You're blocking the goddam road, Lou," I said. He laid his hands flat on the hood of the jeep and tried to lean up closer to me.

"Rex, I brought the SIG," he said.

"What?"

"And the Armalite and the Uzi and the Stoner and the Sten and the Beretta, and a Schmeisser and two grease guns and the AR180, and I've got plenty of ammo—"

Pete nudged me.

"We could use that fire power," he said.

Zeke came over to me.

"Maybe we should let the asshole come with us," he said. "We need an armored artificer with all this off-brand shit we've got."

"We really could use the fire power," Pete said.

I looked over at Bob.

"Okay," he said.

I could tell that the guys were getting restless. They had lost all interest in Lou and were beginning to horse around.

I looked back at Lou.

"Where's the stuff?" I asked him.

"In my car," he said. "Right up the road there."

"Okay," I said. "Go back to the truck and get a tin pot and a flak jacket."

"Thanks, Rex," he said. "Thank you. Thanks."

He stood there for a minute with a shit-eating grin on his face. Then he started for the truck.

"Wait a minute," I said. "How long have you been here?"

"Since dawn," he said.

"Have you heard anything?"

"Nothing."

"Seen anything?"

"Nothing."

"Okay," I said. "Ride up as far as your car on the truck. Then get in behind Zeke at the end of the column."

Pete started up the jeep again and all the guys ran back to their cars, and we continued our advance up the hill.

When we reached the place where Lou had pulled his car off to the side of the road I looked back and saw him jump off the truck and run for his car. From there it was only about a mile and a half to the lodge, which stood in a clearing at the top of the hill.

It gave me a funny feeling when we came to the edge of the clearing and I saw the lodge standing there in the sunlight. I thought back to the last time I had seen it, on Sunday night, when we had been breaking our necks to pack up and get out of there.

We pulled on into the clearing and I directed the guys to make a half circle around the west side of the lodge, but staying back at a distance of about fifty yards.

I wanted to send out teams to reconnoiter the woods around the clearing, but I knew the guys were very restless, and I was actually more worried about maintaining discipline among some of the younger ones than I was about the possibility of being fired on by snipers from the woods.

I went over to Ronnie.

He had gotten out of his van and was standing leaning on his cane and looking at the woods.

"That the place?" he asked.

"That's it," I said. "Will you need any help? Do you want me to send some guys over there with you?"

"No," he said. "I always work alone."

"Well, we'll be covering you, don't worry about that."

He nodded.

"Just hit the dirt if there's any trouble," I said. "I'm going to be covering you myself with the BAR."

"Okay," he said. "I should be able to tell you in about five minutes if it's hot."

I sent Pete for the BAR. I set it up to fire across the hood of the jeep, and Pete fed in some ammo. Then I gave orders for everybody to stay behind the cars and to prepare to give covering fire if necessary, and then I gave Ronnie the signal to go ahead.

He waved back to me from his van and then gunned his engine and went roaring and bouncing across the clearing to the lodge.

There had been a lot of jabbering before, but now everybody shut up, and we all cocked our weapons and took them off the safety and watched Ronnie get out of the van and swoop over to the front door of the lodge. His pockets were loaded with tools, but mostly he just used his hands. He went all around the edges of the door with his long thin fingers, and all around the door jamb, and around the windows on either side of the door. His fingers moved swiftly, like a pianist's. I had offered him a key but he had said he didn't want it, and finally he took out a piece of celluloid and stuck it in the crack next to the lock and at the same time turned the knob with his other hand, and the door opened.

Everybody sort of leaned forward as we watched him go inside, and it was quiet except for a few birds in the trees.

Beyond the lodge you could look across the valley of the Sturrup River to the hills on the other side. There was a heavy mist in the valley, but the sun was burning it away and the wind was rising and driving it to the south.

We could see Ronnie swooping around inside the lodge through the open door. In a couple of minutes he came out and yelled to me that the place was clean.

For the first time I saw some of the guys look at me in a certain way, and I knew that they were feeling sort of let down. So I climbed up on the hood of the jeep and told everybody to gather around.

"Well, so far so good," I said. "Now we're going to make a sweep down to the river."

I told them to get the truck unloaded, and I put Lou in charge of issuing the automatic weapons and checking out each guy on his particular weapon to make sure he knew how to fire the goddam thing, and I assigned Bob to passing out the ammo and the grenades.

While all of that was going on I told Ronnie that we were going to leave him at the lodge as a rear guard, and I gave him a Thompson and a pile of ammo and a walkie-talkie. He seemed disappointed that he hadn't been able to get the rest of himself blown apart, but I didn't give him any time to do any bellyaching.

I left him sitting on the steps of the lodge with his submachine gun in his lap, and I went over to Ogilvie and told him what I wanted him to do, which was to take a couple of guys down ahead of us in the main body and reconnoiter the path leading to the river.

"Okay, I'll do that," he said.

I gave him a Thompson and a walkie-talkie, and I picked out two guys who I thought were maybe a little less of a nigger-haters than most of the guys to go along with him, and I told him to wait for the rest of us at a point where a pine that had been hit by lightning years ago lay across the path.

"Okay," he said.

He was still just wearing his camouflage suit and his black beret.

"Don't you want a helmet and a flak jacket?" I asked him.

"I never wore body armor when I went on patrol," he said. "I never wore a helmet either. That shit just weighs you down and ruins your moves. And I don't want these guys going with me either. I don't like a white man coming along behind me with a gun—I don't care who they are."

"Okay, Ogilvie," I said. "Whatever you say."

I took him over and showed him the path down the side of the hill.

"See you," he said.

He slapped a clip into his Thompson and cocked it and headed off down the path.

By that time Bob and Lou had gotten the guys all organized and they were all loaded up like pack mules with the weapons and the grenades and the ammo in steel boxes and bandoliers. So I gave the order to move out and we started off in single file across the clearing, with me at the head of the column with my Thompson, and Pete right behind me with a walkie-talkie and the BAR, and after him Lou with his SIG, and then Jim with a rifle in each hand and his medical shit in a back pack, and then all the rest of the guys, and finally Zeke and Bob bringing up the rear.

I waved good-by to Ronnie as we went past the lodge, and he waved back.

It was tough going down the path, which was steep and rocky. The guys kept stumbling and slipping on the rocks and dropping their equipment, and a lot of them, particularly the younger ones, weren't in all that good shape, it turned out, and I had to keep calling halts so that they could catch their breath and have a smoke—and just like the spoiled brats I had in the Guard, they bitched and complained about everything, and Jim was always having to put Band-Aids on their blisters.

But when we came down off the hill and reached level ground and I passed the word back that we were entering the real danger zone now, a big change came over them and they got serious. We moved forward slowly and cautiously with our guns at the ready until we came to Ogilvie sitting on the fallen pine.

I halted the column and went ahead to talk to him.

"Nothing stirs," he said.

"Have you got a feeling?" I asked him.

His eyes narrowed.

"How'd you know that?" he said. "Yeah, I've got a feeling."

"So?"

"Something's cooking."

"You think they're right around here?"

"Not right here. But not too far away. How far is the river from here?"

"About a quarter of a mile."

I called up the other guys and had them gather around me.

"Ogilvie says they're here," I told them. "He hasn't seen them but he

has a feeling, and I've got the same feeling."

I took Ogilvie aside.

"I've got a very special assignment for you," I said.

I squatted down and brushed away the leaves on the path and smoothed out the dirt with the flat of my hand and took a twig and drew a little map for him. He squatted down with me. He was sweating real hard just like me, and his black face glistened, and the sweat ran down both our noses and fell on the dirt between us where I was drawing the map.

"Here's the river," I said. "Over on the other side of the tree the path splits off. One way it goes straight along to the river. The other way it goes east about a mile to a bend where the river is silted up and is shallow enough so you can cross it if you don't mind getting wet up to about your armpits."

"Yeah?"

"We'll wait here until you reach the bend. When you get there look it over and call me on your radio and tell me how it looks to you. You'll be able to tell if anybody came across this morning. If you think they're already on this side, come back right away and rejoin the main force. If not, I want you to cross the river and start working your way back to the west and see what you can see."

"Okay."

"In the meantime we'll go on down to the river and set up a position there."

"Okay."

"I'm sending Larry Keegan and Sam Fischer with you," I said, and before he could say anything I went right on. "And don't give me any of that black-and-white shit because they're going with you whether you like it or not. And that's an order."

He gave me another of his narrow looks.

"Okay," he said. "As long as I'm running it."

"You're running it," I said.

I called Larry and Sam over and told them what I wanted them to do and that Ogilvie was in command of the operation. Maybe for a second they started to say something, but they didn't, and they saddled up and fell in behind Ogilvie on the other side of the fallen tree and headed off along the path.

Pete set up the BAR across the tree trunk, and I ordered the other guys to spread out on either side of the path and form a defensive perimeter, and then we sat there waiting and listening, all of us smoking and

drinking up the last of our booze.

It seemed like it took a hundred years before Ogilvie called me on the walkie-talkie and said that they had reached the bend and looked it over and hadn't found any traces of anybody's having come across.

"Okay, proceed as ordered," I said.

"Rajah," he said.

So then I gave the order to fall in, and we saddled up again and headed for the river.

When we got close to the river I told the guys to fan out in a skirmish line, and when the line had formed I told them to get down flat on their bellies in the prone position because we were going to infiltrate the rest of the way through the trees using the good old infantry crawl.

I took the left flank and put Jim on the right, and when we were all ready I gave the hand signal to advance and we began crawling toward the river.

When we reached the edge of the woods and could see the river ahead of us I signaled everybody to keep down, and I crawled out from the trees to the rock where I had taken cover with Pete on Sunday. It felt weird to be back there again. All over the ground were our ejected casings and even the wrappings from the bandage I had put on Pete's head. I got out my binoculars and took off my helmet and then very slowly raised up so that I could see over the top of the rock, and that felt weird too, to be looking over there at the place on the opposite bank where we had first seen the other guys standing, and then where we had seen the guy lift his rifle and fire, and then where he had fallen down after Zeke had caught him between the eyes, and then where all the flashes had come from when they had started shooting at us.

There wasn't a sign of life over there, and I kept looking, but nothing moved and there wasn't a sound. Even the river was absolutely still and not a fish jumped or a breeze ruffled the surface.

All of a sudden I heard something behind me, and I looked back and saw Pete crawling toward me with the BAR cradled in his arms.

"Did you see anything over there?" he said.

"No."

"Can I take a look?"

He took the glasses, and while he was studying the opposite bank I looked to my right and saw the rest of the guys crawling out of the woods, without waiting for my order.

I signaled them to stay back, but they kept on coming until they were all strung out along the bank. Some of them had cover, but most didn't.

Jerry Plotsky and a couple of the other younger guys got behind the rock next to the one where Pete and I were.

"So is there anybody over there?" he asked me.

"Keep your goddam voice down," I said.

"Okay, Pops," he said. Then in a stage whisper he said, "Sir, did you see anybody over there?"

"You shut up," I said. "Do you want to spook them?"

"Spook who?"

He raised up and tilted his helmet back and looked over the top of his rock.

"I don't see shit," he said.

Pete gave me back the glasses.

"I don't see anything either," he said.

"What?" Jerry said. "What did he say?"

"I told you to shut up," I said.

"Fuck you," he said. "Sir."

The other young guys with him all laughed out loud.

"There's not a goddam soul anywhere around here, is there, Pops?" Jerry said. "There was nobody back there at that shack, there's nobody on this side of the fucking river, and there's nobody on that fucking side of the fucking river."

All down the line the guys were stirring around and asking what was going on.

"Stay down!" I yelled. "For Christ's sake, stay down!"

"Yeah, stay down, you assholes!" Jerry shouted gleefully.

"Shut up, you little bastard!" I yelled.

"Up your ass, you old fart!"

He jumped up on the rock.

"*Yeah, you assholes!*" he shouted. "*Stay down and shut up, and that's an order! Don't spook those guys over there whatever you do, you assholes! Hey, look at me! See me! Ain't I a hotshot front-line grunt if you ever saw one? See me in my little tin pot and my flak jacket? Shit! I ought to be home in bed balling my goddam wife, and here I am out in the boonies dressed up like the king of the assholes, and all because this old fart here wants to play soldier!*"

He took off his helmet.

"*Hey, look at this!*" he shouted.

He took his helmet and flung it with all his might, and we watched it arc high up in the air and land with a splash about halfway across the river.

Then I started for him.

"You dirty little Polack!" I yelled.

Pete grabbed me and tried to hold me back, and at the same time Jerry jumped down off the rock and picked up an M-16 and leveled it at me.

"One more step and I blow your fucking head off, you crazy old Canuck," he said.

I knew he meant it.

I let Pete pull me back over to our rock, and I saw Jerry's pals grab him and take the assault rifle away from him.

But the whole thing was unbearable then, and I pushed Pete away from me and picked up the BAR and pointed it across the river and started blasting. And when I did, it was like the whole German Army opened up on us all at once. There must have been a hundred of them over there, and all of them with automatic shit. I hit the dirt and just lay back behind the rock stunned for a minute, while all around me the guys were yelling at each other and screaming in agony and the bullets were like a solid curtain flying through us and over us. Jerry was covered with blood from head to foot, and I could see that a lot of other guys had been hit too. Then I heard somebody open fire from our side, and I looked down the line and saw Lou with a cigarette in his mouth and the SIG in his hands, blazing away. Then Pete opened up with the BAR, and there was a terrific racket as our whole line began returning fire. I grabbed the walkie-talkie and yelled, "*Ogilvie! Attack! Attack!*"

NINETEEN

At certain times I can see clearer than at other times. Sometimes, when the sun comes down low through the windows late in the afternoon, I can make out the slats of the venetian blinds. Sometimes I can make out the shadows of the trees outside the windows moving back and forth on the opposite wall, where the door is. Sometimes I can make out reflections on the ceiling, I think when cars come up the driveway and the sun catches their windshields, Sometimes, when the doctors come and stand around my bed and talk about the God-awful things they've already done to me or are going to do, I can almost make out their faces. Sometimes I can make out the long black hair of a young girl, a student nurse, who I imagine to be very beautiful and who for some reason always holds one of my hands in both of hers for a minute up against her cool nylon uniform and her hard young body every day when she first comes on duty.

But most of the time it's like staring at the side of a white-painted building in bright sunlight, or across a field of snow, or even straight into the headlights of a car. Anyway, it's painful for me to look, to see, and I would rather keep my eyes closed.

I'm alone, and the room is absolutely silent except for the nurses out in the hall and the faint sound of the air conditioning. Any kind of a noise makes my head split. People have to talk to me in a whisper or my head explodes and my hands and legs start jerking and my stomach convulses, and they have to run and bring the needle. Therefore, I never hear most of what's said to me, any more than I can see much of anything.

I've been like this for a long time now, but it doesn't seem like such a long time. With the needle, I have the feeling that I'm always falling through trap doors. I fall through one and then another and another. There have been periods when I have begun to get a grasp of time and have been able to string a few days together, but then it's like somebody hits my hand and knocks all the days up in the air like a deck of cards

and they never come down again. So there's really not much of a feeling of time at all.

Ellen comes to see me every day, when they let her. She never says much, and when she does it's in such a low whisper that I can barely hear her. Then, for the rest of the time, she always takes one of my hands and lays it flat on the bed with the palm up and lays her face sideways in the palm and cries.

They don't let Pat come to see me any more at all. She gets too hysterical.

Michael never came once.

Davie would come all the time, but they keep him away because he talks too much. He can't help himself. He quit college and he's running the store now. He just wants to talk to me about the store and convince me of what a good job he's doing.

At first, there were always detectives and sheriffs and state troopers coming in here wanting to ask me questions and give them statements. But they don't come any more, just like I hear they finally left all of the other guys who are still alive alone because they never could make out a good case against anybody for anything.

A lot of reporters came too, from New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, everywhere, representing all the big television networks and the big newspapers and news magazines. They wanted me to talk to them about what happened and tell them how I felt about it, but I never gave them the satisfaction. All I ever said was that I was sorry that I had lost all of my best friends.

Pete! Lou! Zeke! Jim! Bob! Ogilvie!

Every once in a while I can't control myself and I yell one of their names, and the nurses hear me and come running with the needle because they know that it's my own voice that breaks my head open worse than anything else whenever I more than whisper.

Pete. Lou. Zeke. Jim. Bob. Ogilvie.

I wish I had them back, and I wish to *God* we could go back there together and this time do it *right*. This time it would be *us* that had the superior force, and this time it would be *us* that had the superior fire power, and we would be the ones that got there first and laid low and waited and held our goddam fire until *they* thought there was nobody there and started horsing around and exposed their whole position, and then *we* would cut *them* to pieces.

The fact is, we never had a chance. But it wasn't the first time I'd ever been in a situation like that, and it always turns out the same. For

instance, in the war, you might go into a town where you'd been told on the Bible that all the Krauts had pulled out ten hours ago, and then all of a sudden you'd be surrounded and they'd be hitting you with everything but the kitchen sink. And the worst part of a situation like that, where you take a lot of casualties in the first few minutes, there's so much dying going on that everybody seems to go into shock, even the ones who haven't been touched, and all they seem to want to do is lie down and curl up in a little ball, or else they seem to get carried away themselves by the dying and seem to want to be part of it and do crazy things, like Lou standing up in full view of the enemy with the SIG and blasting away, and promptly get their heads shot off, like him, and that's how all the great slaughters are made.

In less than five minutes we lost over two thirds of our side, dead and wounded, and they never stopped raking us with all their automatic shit. I knew just from the sheer volume of it that there had to be a hundred of them over there, and you could tell that very simply what they had in mind was to wipe us out.

I saw Lou get it. He stumbled backwards a couple of steps and then his head flew apart. And right after that, Pete, who had been firing the BAR over the rock, got hit in the throat and fell back on top of me. It was a hell of a wound, and the blood squirting out all over me felt like it was boiling hot. I pushed him away and tried to get the BAR back in action, but I couldn't do anything with all that shit in the air.

All I could think of was Ogilvie and whether he had heard me when I had yelled to him on the walkie-talkie to attack. I never got an answer from him because the goddam thing was blown out of my hand by a ricochet right after I said it.

Our firing sputtered out and then stopped altogether, and then all you could hear was the screaming and the yelling and, over that, the smack and whine of their bullets. We were just pinned down and couldn't move an inch, and the worst thing was that most of us didn't have any cover at all except for the bodies of the dead guys. But then, with everything looking so bad, I heard a whump, and then another whump, and the first thing that came into my mind was, "Oh, Christ, now they're throwing a mortar at us!" But the firing from the other side let up all of a sudden and there were a couple more whumps, and I finally realized that it was Ogilvie's patrol over there shoving grenades up their ass.

I got up and broke for the woods, carrying the BAR. On the way, I grabbed hold of a big fat kid named Elroy Morgan, who was a Vietnam vet and was supposed to have been such a hotshit over there, to hear

him tell it, that he gave the Viet Cong fits from one end of Eye Corps to the other. He was flat on his face on the ground behind the body of his pal Tim O'Reilly, another Vietnam hotshit. When I grabbed hold of him, Elroy pulled away from me and tried to crawl in underneath his buddy. I grabbed him again and stood him up and kicked his fat can all the way to the cover of the trees.

He just moaned. "Get me out of here, Rex. Please, get me out of here."

I told him, "Elroy, I'm going to kill you."

I wanted to see if I was getting through to him. He was covered with blood and dirt, but I didn't think any of the blood was his, and I needed him because he was as strong as an ox.

He dropped down on his knees in front of me and I put the muzzle of my .45 right between his eyes.

"If you don't do what I tell you to, I'm going to kill you sure as shit, Elroy," I said.

He started rocking back and forth on his knees with his hands clasped in front of his nose, moaning to me not to kill him.

"Go collect a couple of assault rifles, Elroy," I said. "And all the ammo for them and all the grenades you can get your hands on in a hurry. Move!"

I knew we only had a few seconds, so I pulled him to his feet and pushed him toward the river, and I ran back to the rock and picked up the ammo boxes for the BAR. Guys were yelling at me, the wounded, but I couldn't stop, and I got back to the trees just as they started firing at us again. The firing wasn't as intense as before, but there was still plenty of it. Some of the guys who hadn't been hit at all, or not too bad, had made it back to the trees by then. Mostly they were just crapped out on the ground in a daze, but a few of them looked like they were thinking of sneaking off. So I got out my .45 again and told them I was shooting all deserters.

Ray came over to me.

"Zeke's dead," he said. "So's Stanley."

"How about Jim?" I asked him.

"Him too," he said.

"Everybody's fucking dead," one of the guys blubbered. "Now they're going to come over here and massacre the shit out of every goddam one of us."

"Ray," I said, "I'm putting you in charge of this detail. You organize these guys and make them get the wounded back in here under cover, and then you get Jim's kit and give them some morphine and try to stop

the bleeding."

I took his .38 out of his holster and checked it to see that it was loaded and then stuck it in his hand.

"Shoot all deserters," I said.

I didn't have any more time. Elroy and I saddled up with all our weapons and ammo and grenades and we went as fast as we could upriver through the trees toward the bend. I made Elroy go ahead of me and prodded him with the muzzle of the BAR every time he looked like he wanted to slow down.

When we got to the bend it was quiet, but off downstream we could hear the muffled pop-pop-pop of the automatic weapons. We set up the BAR back under the trees, but leaving a wide field of fire, and we had no sooner set up than I saw Ogilvie break out of the woods across the river. He was quite a way downstream. I put my glasses on him and saw him pause for a minute and look back. He was unarmed and alone, so I figured that the rest of the patrol had been wiped out and he had run out of ammo for the Thompson. Then it looked like he heard people coming after him, because he started running along the bank, stripping off his shoes and his shirt as he ran. But there were some big rocks in his way, and just as he started to climb over the rocks a bunch of men ran out of the trees behind him. Without even looking back, Ogilvie seemed to know they were there, and before they could even get off a shot at him he leaped off the rocks and made a long shallow dive out toward the middle of the river.

The men ran upstream along the bank a little way and then stopped and lined up with their weapons ready, waiting for that black head to come up for air, and it was beautiful because they had no more of an idea that I was over there covering them with the BAR than Ogilvie did.

So I lined up my shot and waited until the last moment, and just when Ogilvie broke water, but before they could fire at him, because he had made a turn under water that threw them off, I opened up on them, seven there were, and knocked them all down with one long burst. And when they were down I kept pouring it into them, the same as they had done to us, and by the time I was through there wasn't a sound or a twitch out of them any more.

Then I left Elroy to cover me with the gun and ran down to the bank and waved when Ogilvie came up for air, and he understood what had happened and swam the rest of the way on the surface. I waded out to pull him in when he got near the bank. He looked half dead of exhaustion and I saw that he was bleeding pretty bad from a couple of

wounds, one in his left wrist and the other in his right shoulder.

I had to almost carry him back to our position, and when we got there I found that Elroy had deserted. I laid Ogilvie out on the ground and got out my medical kit and fixed him up the best I could, at the same time keeping an eye on the other side of the river, knowing that we were going to have plenty of company in a minute.

"Just you?" Ogilvie asked, looking around.

I nodded.

"We took a hell of a lot of casualties," I said. "There are a lot of woundeds back there. A lot of deads. The guys wouldn't listen to me. We got to the river and they didn't see anybody over there, so they figured I was full of shit and got smart and started horsing around out in the open, and then they hit us and they really chewed us up. So I came up here to cover you coming back and keep them from crossing."

"They chewed us up too," Ogilvie said. "We got some of them with the grenades, but shit, they've got a whole army over there, you know."

"How many?"

"I don't know."

"A hundred?"

"Must be."

"We're going to hold this position, Ogilvie," I said.

"Okay," he said.

"We've got the BAR, two ARs, a fair amount of ammo, and seven grenades."

"We'll hold it," he said. "You hit at all?"

"No."

"Well, I can still shoot. We'll hold it."

From the corner of my eye I saw something move in the woods across the river. I kept watching and saw a man crawl on his belly out of the woods and down to the bank to look at the pile of dead, and then crawl back.

After that, we saw movement all along the other side of the river, deep back behind the trees, and sometimes heard voices faintly, and we knew that they were spreading out and that the next thing we could expect was for them to hit us all at once with everything they had, to test our response, hoping that we would fire back and reveal our position and our strength.

So we pulled farther back into the trees, and finally the fusillade came, a sustained burst of fire that brushed the trees all around us like hail, but we kept our heads down and they didn't touch us. Then we

brought the BAR out a little way and waited, and there was another burst of covering fire and two guys carrying submachine guns ran out of the woods and down the bank and started wading across the river as fast as they could go. We let them get about a third of the way across and then cut them down.

They knew where we were then and they all opened up on us together, but we pulled back again into the trees, and when we were completely screened off from their fire we got up and ran with our guns about a hundred yards upstream and infiltrated back to the edge of the woods again. They had stopped firing by then and there was a long pause, while the two guys floated in the river, one face up and one face down, turning the water bright red with their blood.

"Shit, yes," Ogilvie said. "We'll hold it."

I looked at him.

"You and me."

He nodded.

"You and me."

I've never felt closer to a man in my whole life than I did to him right then, and I've never known one either who was braver or more dedicated, because the fact is he was more dead than alive, with all his loss of blood and the agony of moving around and trying to fire an automatic weapon with the kind of wounds he had. I've just never seen anything like him when it came to being a soldier, and that goes for the SS in the Ardennes and everybody else. And we were so perfect together. It was like we could actually read each other's mind. He never had to say anything to me and I never had to say anything to him. None of this shit about having to think for the other guy and tell him what to do and what to watch out for, or worry either about whether he's going to go to pieces on you when the going gets rough or stand by you till kingdom come and fuck the odds.

They laid down another curtain of fire pretty soon and tried to cross again, this time with more guys, who threw a mess of grenades in our direction before they jumped into the water, but we got them too, and that was how we held the riverbank all morning, just Ogilvie and me against all of them, hit-and-run, hit-and-run, like that, until finally one of them came out of nowhere—but I guess he had crossed the river way upstream or downstream and we hadn't even seen him and then had sneaked through the woods until he located us—and hit us with a grenade that blew us both to hell.

Well, Ogilvie all the way to hell, and me three quarters of the way.

So I have a plate in my head and my face is destroyed and my body is all torn up and full of fragments that they can't seem to dig out, and I'm fed by a tube they stick in my arm, two days in the left and then two days in the right, or sometimes in my nose, and all I'm doing now is waiting for General Davidson.

One day when I was in the base hospital in England, a sudden hush fell over the ward. It was a big ward and it was funny to hear it go silent that way because it was never quiet except in the middle of the night and sometimes not even then. I was partly in a daze because I'd just been operated on recently again, and I didn't know what was going on. Then I looked around and saw that everybody was staring down toward the door at the far end of the ward. A tall man in an army officer's uniform was standing there, surrounded by a group of officers and hospital staff. The man stood head and shoulders above everybody else, and when I heard a guy say, "Jesus, the Eagle," I realized that it was General Davidson, the division commander himself. He was an impressive-looking man, very slender and straight and handsome, with eyes like an eagle, where he got his name from, and which seemed to be able to find your eyes even at a great distance and search them. I had seen him a couple of times, up on the line, and it had always inspired me just to be in his presence. He was enormously respected by the men in the line because he was known as a soldier's general who really cared about his troops, not like some of those rear-echelon assholes who didn't give a shit about anything but getting their name in the papers back home.

He started walking slowly along the aisle between the long rows of beds, and I felt his eyes on me all the way, and he stopped finally at the foot of my bed, and then it wasn't just his eyes on me but everybody's in the whole ward, and it was enough to make your heart fail. For it seemed like years he just stood there staring at me, and then he said, in a beautiful deep voice that I knew could be heard very clearly from one end of the ward to the other, "I just wanted to come here today and see what a real fighting man looks like." And then he turned and with his party walked slowly back down the ward and out the door.

I wish he'd come. I can't hang on much longer.